



HONOUR,
EXCHANGE
and VIOLENCE
in *Beowulf*

PETER S. BAKER

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HONOUR, EXCHANGE AND VIOLENCE
IN *BEOWULF*

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Professor John Hines, School of History and Archaeology, Cardiff University, Colum Drive, Cardiff, Wales, UK CF10 3EU

Professor Catherine Cubitt, Centre for Medieval Studies, University of York, The King’s Manor, York, England, UK YO1 7EP

Boydell & Brewer, PO Box 9, Woodbridge, Suffolk, England, UK IP12 3DF

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Honour, Exchange and Violence in *Beowulf*

Peter S. Baker

D. S. BREWER

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Preface

I first began thinking about the violence of *Beowulf* during the early days of the occupation of Iraq. Like many Americans, I had been bewildered by our government's efforts to persuade us that going to war was the right thing to do. Each *casus belli*—that Iraq was developing nuclear, chemical or biological weapons, that it was collaborating with Al Qaeda, that it was somehow linked to the attacks of September 11, 2001, that it was failing to co-operate with United Nations inspectors—had in its turn been discredited. Further, there had been credible predictions of excessive costs, sectarian strife, and high casualties (especially among Iraqi civilians). Yet war had been a certainty: our leaders clearly wanted it, and they were determined to have it. As I watched the predicted and entirely avoidable disaster unfold, I had no answer for the question: *why were we in Iraq?*

Thinking about the causes of the Iraq war led me to think about the violence of *Beowulf* in ways that I had never done before. I had often asked my students questions like 'why does Beowulf go to Denmark?' and 'why does he fight the dragon?' which always led to stimulating discussions; but I had never asked the same questions of such minor characters as Hengest and Thryth or addressed the broader question of what drove the violence of this violent culture.

There is an extensive scholarly literature on violence, crossing many temporal, geographical, disciplinary and theoretical boundaries. One cannot take account of it all, but must select the approaches that seem likeliest to provide answers to the questions one wants answered (see p. 2, n. 4). This study is historicist and anthropological in its approach, reading history both as story (or analogue) and as evidence for the cultural world of poet and audience, and reading anthropology to understand such concepts as honour, gift-exchange and dispute resolution in a global as well as an Anglo-Saxon context.

One aspect of this book that its methodology will not explain is its choice of words for certain key concepts—its diction or, to use an old-fashioned word, its tone. I have tried on the one hand to avoid euphemism, the use of certain words (e.g. ‘feud’, ‘tribe’, ‘booty’), common in *Beowulf* criticism, whose effect, it seems to me, is to romanticize and soften the focus on their referents. On the other hand, I have avoided language that would imply criticism of the *Beowulf* poet’s failure to share my views on war and peace. It seems undeniable that early medieval poets sometimes encourage us to view as admirable characters who would not count as good people in our world (*þæt wæs gōd cyning!*). But it seems more useful to understand than to condemn.

It is for the reader to decide whether I have succeeded in making a contribution to the understanding of this work of the distant past while declining the temptation to judge the values that inform it. I can, however, testify to the difficulty of the project. Consider: When Beowulf goes with Higelac to do battle in Frisia, he kills thirty men, cutting them off from past and future, robbing them of honour and dignity, turning their wives into widows and their children into orphans, abandoning their corpses on the battlefield to be devoured by wolves and ravens. And each time he bends over a bloody corpse to strip sword, helmet and corslet from what moments ago was a proud warrior, what he feels is joy, for the destruction of that man’s life is his gain. *And Beowulf is a good man*, gentle with his fellows, kindly and generous to his subordinates, great defender of his nation, God’s ally in the eternal battle against the forces of darkness. The reader who manages to bear all this in mind will understand the spirit in which I have tried to approach this work.

It is a pleasure to return to Boydell & Brewer with this project some twelve years after I first published with them; I would especially like to thank Caroline Palmer for her careful attention to the book and her calm and reasonable advice.

I am grateful to the University of Virginia Sesquicentennial Associateship programme for a leave of absence during which I was able to write the final chapters of this work. A number of my colleagues at UVA have made valuable contributions. It would not have been possible to write Chapter Four without the advice of colleagues in nineteenth-century literature, including Karen Chase, Jerome McGann and Herbert Tucker, who patiently listened to and commented on a lecture based on a preliminary version: Alison Booth was

especially helpful, reading an early version of the first part of Chapter Four and providing both advice and encouragement. I have enjoyed discussing a number of the topics in this book over lunches with Paul Kershaw, whose *Peaceful Kings* was an especially important source as I was finishing the project. I have consulted with Gordon Stewart and Erik Midelfort about translations from German and with Christine Schott about translations from Old Icelandic.

An anonymous reader for the press (you know who you are) read all of this book but a few pages recently added and suggested numerous improvements. A. C. Spearing, best of all possible colleagues, read much of the book in draft and offered many suggestions; his encouragement has been just as valuable, and his own books and articles have always been important influences. Michael Lapidge befriended me when I was a graduate student, more than thirty years ago, and I am still proud to call him a friend; his scholarship has always been an inspiration and a model. He read much of this work in draft and answered a number of questions on particular points. The influence on this book of my teacher and mentor, Fred C. Robinson, will be evident to all informed readers. His insistence on exacting attention to the meanings of words, exemplified by his 'Lexicography and Literary Criticism', which appeared just as I was heading off to college, has, it is fair to say, informed everything I have tried to write on the subject of Old English literature. My wife, Rosemary Gould, read nearly the entire book and offered much valuable advice. A formidable scholar of nineteenth-century literature, she was especially helpful with Chapter Four; but without her love and wise support I could not have completed this project at all.

Finally I will mention that none of the people I have thanked here has read every word of this book. All have deniability for any errors of fact or judgement that readers and reviewers may detect.

Peter S. Baker

Charlottesville, Virginia

28 October 2012

Abbreviations

ASC = Dumville and Keynes, eds., *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*

BT = Bosworth, Toller, and Campbell, *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*

CCSL = Corpus Christianorum Series Latina

DOE = Cameron, Amos, and Healey, *Dictionary of Old English*

EETS = Early English Text Society

HBS = Henry Bradshaw Society

HE = Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*

HF = Gregory of Tours, *Historia Francorum*

MED = Kurath and S. M. Kuhn, *Middle English Dictionary*

MGH = Monumenta Germaniae Historica

OED = John Simpson, *Oxford English Dictionary Online*

PL = Migne, *Patrologiæ cursus completus*

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

THERE'S NO getting around the fact that *Beowulf* is violent. As probably hundreds of commentators have observed,¹ the poem is organized around the hero's battles with three monsters; further, the 'digressions and episodes' that frequently interrupt the action are more often than not tales of strife. It has been said that much of *Beowulf* consists of speech rather than action² and that it might more appropriately be described as an elegy than as an epic.³ There is much truth in these observations. But when the characters of *Beowulf* speak, they generally speak of fighting: they vow or elicit vows to fight, thank people for fighting or blame them for not fighting, remember or anticipate fights, offer advice about how to become a better fighter. And the elegiac content of the poem, the 'dirge' (Tolkien's word) that not only concludes it but is also woven through its rich fabric, is for those who have died violently and those who inevitably will.

¹ E.g. Baker, 'Beowulf'. Further citations for such an obvious point would be otiose, but this seems a good place to mention several general works that I have found myself consulting over and over, though I don't often have occasion to cite them: A. Orchard, *Critical Companion*; Bjork and Niles, *A Beowulf Handbook*; Fulk and Cain, *A History of Old English Literature*; Garmonsway and Jacqueline Simpson, *Beowulf and Its Analogues*; Calder and Allen, *Sources and Analogues I*; Calder, Bjork, et al., *Sources and Analogues II*; Lapidge, Blair, et al., *Blackwell Encyclopaedia*. Among editions, I have found Mitchell and Robinson, *Beowulf* and Fulk, Bjork, and Niles, *Klaeber's Beowulf* to be especially valuable. While I have sometimes disagreed with their readings, my admiration for the editors' industry and judgement is unbounded.

² A. Orchard, *Critical Companion*, pp. 203–8.

³ J. R. R. Tolkien, 'Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics', p. 275.

This book starts from the position that the violence of *Beowulf* is a worthy object of study, and that one way to approach it (there are others, just as valid⁴) is as an element in the complex of social practices depicted in the poem. Violence as social practice has been treated in wider-ranging literary studies, especially those by John M. Hill (to which I owe a particular debt). But the most extensive scholarly literature on violence in the early Middle Ages has been produced by historians,⁵ who have for many years been in fruitful dialogue with anthropologists working in the same area.⁶ In attempting to understand the social context for the violence of *Beowulf* I have gratefully relied upon work in these disciplines as well as a wide variety of primary sources—other heroic poems, sagas, histories, chronicles, charters, homilies, saints' lives and more.

The unwelcome guest

Violence in Old English studies is a bit like the eccentric relation whom one can't get away with not inviting to the family reunion—the one who keeps

⁴ For the material culture of violence, see e.g. Davidson, *The Sword in Anglo-Saxon England*; Brooks, 'Weapons and Armour'; and Leslie Webster's appendix 'Archaeology and *Beowulf*' in Mitchell and Robinson, *Beowulf*. There are numerous histories of medieval warfare; these rarely address the kinds of questions explored here: see e.g. Contamine, *War in the Middle Ages*; Keen, *Medieval Warfare: A History* and Nicholson, *Medieval Warfare*. Under the heading 'cultural studies' we find not one, but a range of approaches, including the Lacanian in Thormann, 'Enjoyment of Violence' and the Girardian in E. Wilson, 'Blood Wrought Peace'. Important theoretical studies include Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*; Scarry, *The Body in Pain* and Žižek, *Violence*. That I have found little occasion to cite such works should not be read as a rejection of the approaches they take.

⁵ See especially the collections by Davies and Fouracre, *Settlement of Disputes*; Halsall, *Violence and Society*; Brown and Górecki, *Conflict in Medieval Europe*; Drake, *Violence in Late Antiquity* and Tuten and Billado, *Feud, Violence and Practice*. See also the book-length studies Halsall, *Warfare and Society* and Hyams, *Rancor & Reconciliation in Medieval England*.

⁶ For the anthropological literature on disputes, see e.g. Roberts, *Order and Dispute* and the essays in Caplan, *Understanding Disputes*. For a survey of some anthropological literature addressed to historians, see Roberts, 'The Study of Dispute: Anthropological Perspectives'.

bringing up topics of conversation that no one else wants to talk about. In a recent essay aimed primarily at students, Andy Orchard addresses the question, 'Is violence what Old English literature is about?'⁷ His answer is a wise and worthwhile meditation on the value of Anglo-Saxon culture; but what strikes one first about the essay is the way it starts off in a defensive crouch. The field of Old English (synonymous in the popular imagination with *Beowulf* studies) has long been haunted by the opinion of some that there is nothing much in it aside from 'hairy men beating each other up'⁸ and that today's sophisticated readers 'regard tales of feasting, feuding and dragon-slaying as irrelevant'.⁹ In response, or perhaps just in keeping with the tenor of the times, a prominent strain of contemporary literary criticism sees in *Beowulf* not so much a celebration as a critique of the violent way of life it depicts; and much criticism promotes Anglo-Saxon culture as literate, cultivated and evolved well beyond ancient barbarities.

The Anglo-Saxons were far from primitive: every advance in our knowledge of them (for example, the recent discovery of the Staffordshire Hoard) increases our appreciation for the sophistication of their culture. But sophistication and violence are not incompatible: in Anglo-Saxon England, as in other medieval cultures, early and late, the highest levels of society were organized around war-making. The nobility of this period was a warrior elite whose male members zealously cultivated and jealously defended their warlike reputations and whose women participated in the bellicosity in their own way. While the accomplishments of kings who promoted learning and the arts were celebrated, the most admired kings were those who were best at waging war. The obituary of Alfred the Great in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* says that *se wæs cyning ofer eall Ongelcyn būtan ðæm dæle þe under Dena onwalde wæs* 'he was king over all the English na-

⁷ A. Orchard, 'Beowulf and Other Battlers'. To be fair I must mention, as another contributor to the volume in which this essay appears, that the questions heading each essay were supplied by the editors.

⁸ Janie Steen, quoted in *The Guardian* for 20 March 2001 (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2001/mar/20/highereducation.english>), describing her fears on beginning compulsory Old English at Oxford. These fears proved unfounded (happily for Old English studies, as shown by Steen, *Verse and Virtuosity*).

⁹ *The Daily Telegraph* for 22 June 1999, quoted by Lee, *Whither Old English?*

tion except the part that was under Danish control' (*ASC* A 900).¹⁰ What most impressed the chronicler was not Alfred's educational programme, but rather his expansionist military policy.

To the modern way of thinking, a violent act is a severe disturbance of the social order. While we can resolve many kinds of disputes through private negotiation, those that become violent always draw the attention of the authorities (or are supposed to do so). By contrast, up until the end of the Middle Ages, and even beyond, violence had a recognized place in the social order, whether in international relations or in household affairs. The moment in *Das Nibelungenlied* where Kriemhild tells Hagen how Siegfried has punished her for insulting Brunhild brings us up short:

'Daz hât mich sît gerouwen,' sprach daz edel wîp.
'ouch hât er sô zerblouwen dar umbe mînen lîp.
daz ich ie beswârte ir mit rede den muot,
daz hât vil wol errochen der helt küene unde guot.'¹¹

'I have since come to regret that', said the noble lady,
'and he has beaten me within an inch of my life;
that brave and good hero has very well avenged
my ever having troubled her mind with my talk.'

What shocks is not so much the statement that Siegfried has beaten his wife nearly to death (such things sometimes happen even in our own enlightened times) as that Kriemhild seems to approve of her own beating and expects Hagen to do so as well. The eruption into visibility (in a passage omitted from one popular translation¹²) of what Slavoj Žižek calls

¹⁰ Quotations from the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (abbreviated *ASC* followed by manuscript sigil and year) are from Dumville and Keynes, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: A Collaborative Edition*. With this *Chronicle* entry compare a poem commemorating Æthelstan's donation of a gospel book to Christ Church, Canterbury; it praises his piety and generosity, but opens by noting that God made him king *ut ualeat reges rex ipse feroces / uincere bellipotens, colla superba terens* 'so that this king himself, mighty in war, might be able to conquer other fierce kings, treading down their proud necks' (Lapidge, 'Some Latin Poems', pp. 95–6).

¹¹ Hennig, *Das Nibelungenlied*, p. 141.

¹² Pretzel, *Das Nibelungenlied*, pp. 134–5; the suppressed stanza would have been numbered 837.

‘objective violence’—that which is inherent in the organization of society and normally hidden—forcibly reminds us that the line separating such violence from the ‘subjective’, which is seen as out of the ordinary and often aberrant and blameworthy, has, since the thirteenth century, been erased and redrawn in quite a different place.¹³

The principals in *Das Nibelungenlied* are at the top of the hierarchy of status and power: there are no authorities who can impose peace upon them and bring an end to their disputes. But medieval states were not often able to impose peace upon persons of lower status either, and their efforts to regulate certain kinds of violence, such as that directed against wives and slaves, seems to have been nominal. Max Weber’s famous definition of the state as that entity which claims a monopoly on the use of physical violence does not apply here.¹⁴

The state could react with extreme violence, on the other hand, to offenses it cared about and was able to regulate. Mutilation was a common punishment for crimes such as theft, slander and rape;¹⁵ to judge from frequent references to *hēafodstoccas* ‘head-stakes’ in the boundary clauses of charters, these grisly reminders of the penalty for evil-doing must have been a common sight throughout the country.¹⁶ A law from an (unfortunately

¹³ The distinction of objective, subjective and symbolic violence is fundamental to Žižek, *Violence*; for definitions, see pp. 1–2.

¹⁴ As Weber himself recognized (‘Politik als Beruf’, http://de.wikisource.org/wiki/Politik_als_Beruf). For the decline of private violence and private methods of dispute resolution along with the emergence of the modern Weberian state, see especially Ruff, *Violence in Early Modern Europe* and Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined*, who assembles much statistical evidence for the decline of both warfare and homicide. On legal regulation of violence against wives, see e.g. Hawkes, ‘“Reasonable” Laws’. On punishment of slaves, see Pelteret, *Slavery in Early Medieval England from the Reign of Alfred until the Twelfth Century*, pp. 87, 101, 104.

¹⁵ See O’Brien O’Keeffe, ‘Body and Law’, especially p. 215, for a summary of punishments commonly in use and changes in legal custom over time. Reynolds, *Anglo-Saxon Deviant Burial Customs* (see also his ‘Crime and Punishment’) contains a comprehensive survey of the evidence for such punishments as leave traces in the archaeological record (especially hanging, decapitation and dismemberment), and burial of criminals and other ‘social deviants’ in ‘execution cemeteries’ and elsewhere.

¹⁶ By a search in the *DOE Corpus* (<http://tapor.library.utoronto.ca/doecorpus/>), various forms of the word *hēafodstoc* occur in nineteen charters; see also Reynolds, *Anglo-Saxon*

lost) law code of Eadgar is reported to have dictated that a thief or robber taken anywhere in the country

caecatis luminibus, truncatis manibus, auulsis auribus, incisis naribus, et subtractis pedibus excrucicaretur diutius; et sic demum decoriata pelle capitis cum crinibus, per omnia pene membra mortuus relinqueretur in agris, deuorandus a feris et auibus atque nocturnicanibus.

would be tortured at length by having his eyes put out, his hands cut off, his ears torn off, his nostrils carved open and his feet removed; and finally, with the skin and hair of his head flayed off, he would be abandoned in the open fields, dead in respect of nearly all his limbs, to be devoured by wild beasts and birds and hounds of the night.¹⁷

The spirit if not the letter of this law seems to be confirmed by later laws prescribing similar penalties for theft.¹⁸ Yet one may doubt how often the state was able both to apprehend and punish such criminals: the law of this period not only predicted how the state might act, but also licensed local groups to act on their own behalf, as when (to take a famous instance) the laws of Wihtred permitted communities to regard as a thief any outsider who seemed to be acting stealthily and either kill or set him free, as they judged best.¹⁹ To the modern eye, Anglo-Saxon law enforcement looks disconcertingly informal.

Medieval levels of violence seem unsustainable to us. It seems obvious that a state that takes so little action against violent behaviour must be too chaotic to survive, and one in which royal succession is frequently decided by combat and murder must be anarchic and on the point of collapse. In response, perhaps, to this intuition, some critics have looked at the society depicted in *Beowulf* and declared that it contains the seeds of its own destruction.²⁰ Perhaps so; but if the society of *Beowulf* bears any relation to that of Anglo-Saxon England—say, as a reflection of the values of much

Deviant Burial Customs, pp. 273–4.

¹⁷ Lantfred's *Translatio et miracula S. Swithuni*, ed. and trans. Lapidge, *The Cult of St Swithun*, pp. 310–13.

¹⁸ For comment see, in addition to O'Keefe, Wormald, *Making of English Law*, pp. 125–7.

¹⁹ Wihtred 28 (Liebermann, *Gesetze der Angelsachsen*, i. 14); Ine 20 (*ibid.* i. 98).

²⁰ See e.g. Berger and Leicester, 'Social Structure as Doom'.

of its audience—then those seeds are surely of the slow-germinating kind. After all, the Anglo-Saxons managed to muddle through some six tumultuous centuries.

Methods for handling violent disputes were broadly similar across much of early medieval Europe, both when codified in law and when governed less formally by what Patrick Geary calls ‘a complex of shared values and implicit rules’ (quoted below, p. 175), both where the state was strong (e.g. Carolingian Francia) and where it was all but nonexistent (e.g. Iceland). These methods succeeded in maintaining reasonably stable societies, though with levels of violence that most modern readers of *Beowulf* would find unacceptable.

The violence of *Beowulf*, if an unwelcome topic, is nevertheless an important aspect of the poem. We will find that this violence is not a simple matter of ‘hairy men beating each other up’; rather, it is a complex phenomenon, the understanding of which constitutes much of this book’s project. The following sections will introduce some of the concepts that inform the remainder of this book.

Violence as social practice

Violence is a social practice, and every violent act is a social transaction. Like all social practices, this one is governed by custom and law. In a valuable survey of scholarship on early medieval violence, the historian Guy Halsall writes, ‘Violent relationships can often be seen as a discourse, structured around shared norms.’²¹ This short statement has many implications, which Halsall develops throughout his survey and his other scholarship. For our purposes, the insistence on the importance of norms will be essential. Halsall again:

To read the intentions or significance of violence, to know what kinds of reply are deemed ‘correct’, or to try to anticipate the responses of opponents or third parties, requires mutual acceptance of norms, especially those governing the legitimacy of these actions. Such norms are often founded on

²¹ Halsall, *Violence and Society*, p. 16.

religious belief and spiritual sanction, and this is especially true in considering the ritual side of violence. Where the actions of one side are not based upon these norms, as was obviously the case with pagan Vikings, the other will not be able to understand them, put them into perspective, or know how to respond. Regardless of how the perpetrators see them, their actions will always seem to break the rules, and, in short, to be extreme, unfettered violence. This lack of comprehension surely generated the ninth-century terror of the Vikings and the effects which this in turn produced, and helps us to reconcile this terror and its consequences with the fact that, from an abstracted viewpoint, Viking warfare encompassed the same types of action, fought for the same purposes, as western European Christian warfare.²²

The practices and warlike values of pagan Scandinavians and Christian Anglo-Saxons were similar enough to justify my citing pagan Scandinavian sources to illuminate *Beowulf*. But the differences could be significant. Christian armies secured their victories by requiring oaths (along with hostages) from vanquished foes. But oaths meant different things to pagans and Christians:

Because of their blithe contempt for the wrath of the Christian God, the pagan Northmen appeared untrustworthy in the extreme to the English. Just as the Romans had found the Celts of Spain shocking in their lack of *fides*, the English were confounded by a foe to whom oaths seemed mere words, to be honored or broken as the situation required.²³

An early attempt by Alfred the Great to deal with this problem, discussed by Abels (*ibid.*), is nearly comic. In 876, after Alfred and some vikings had fought to a stalemate, the two armies agreed to exchange hostages and oaths, the vikings swearing *on þām hālgan bēage* ‘on the holy ring’ (*ASC* A 876) rather than, say, on a relic. But the hope that pagans could be bound by an oath that merely exchanged a Christian for a pagan object was disappointed when the viking army stole away to Exeter, where they

²² Halsall, *Violence and Society*, pp. 11–12.

²³ Abels, *Lordship and Military Obligation*, pp. 85–6.

made more trouble. For Asser, this was yet another tiresome instance of the *fallacia* 'deceitfulness' of the vikings.²⁴

The problem of groups in conflict failing to understand each other's 'language' is familiar in the 'asymmetric warfare' of the modern world. Opponents may not only practise different religions (Jewish vs. Muslim or Christian vs. Muslim). They may also differ in their access to war-making technologies (one side having tanks and unmanned planes while the other has AK-47 rifles and hand-launched rockets), and such imbalances can force significant tactical differences. In the Iraq war, bad feelings and exaggerated fears were all but inevitable when American forces relied heavily on air power, which often killed innocent civilians, while insurgents resorted to suicide bombings and roadside IEDs (improvised explosive devices).

To return to *Beowulf*: it would be jarring, but not inappropriate, to call the conflict between Grendel and the Danes an instance of asymmetric warfare. In addition to what one might describe as a difference of faith (Grendel and his mother, descended from Cain, are God's enemies, while the Danes, though pagan, somehow are not), Grendel's equipment and tactics are radically unlike those of the Danes: he fights without weapons, relying instead on his claws, teeth and massive strength, which enable him to kill thirty warriors at a time. Apparently too tough to be harmed by a sword (987–90), Grendel leaves the Danes confused and unable to contend with such an alien and uncanny foe.²⁵ The evil of Grendel is reflected not only in the rhetoric of damnation that is attached to him, but also in his fighting style.

Unlike the Danes, Beowulf knows how to speak monster. He is a match for Grendel in strength, killing thirty men in a single battle (2361–2), and in tactics, putting aside weapons and fighting with his hands (435–40, 2501–8). He can also prevail in the more conventional battle against Grendel's mother, once he has located a sword that will cut her preter-

²⁴ Asser's *Vita Alfredi* ch. 49 (Stevenson, *Asser's Life of King Alfred*, pp. 36–8; Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, pp. 82–3). For commentary see, in addition to Abels, the notes by Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, 245–6.

²⁵ The Danes are not weak in conventional military terms, and Hrothgar is not to be considered a weak king (862–3): one of their most notable victories, the destruction of the Heathobards, is still in the future (*Widsith* 45–9).

naturally tough flesh, and he can do so in a terrifyingly alien environment: the *nīðsele* 'hostile hall' at the bottom of the monster-infested *mere*.

Beowulf's strength, courage and adaptability have their limits: he cannot breathe flame and he is not fireproof. Yet the dragon's way of fighting probably should not be described in terms of norms. The dragon is represented as a beast, as has often been pointed out: it cannot be expected to conform to human practices or condemned for failing to do so. In a sense, Beowulf's death in the dragon fight may more closely resemble Carloman's reputedly being killed by a boar (*ASC* A 885) than it does his early monster fights. Of course, this battle has greater significance than any hunting accident could have; but the fact that the soulless dragon does not challenge the rules that govern violence in the human realm may explain why, unlike the Grendelkin, it is described largely without rancour.

The poet's treatment of the Heathobards, Swedes, Franks and Frisians, human enemies of the Geats and Danes, is also surprisingly without rancour: both the poet and his characters avoid the rhetoric of damnation that is routinely applied to the Grendelkin. One possible explanation is that all these nations are imagined as subscribing to the same norms. The human battles of *Beowulf* are fought according to a set of rules that is well understood by all the parties: no one is seen as 'fighting dirty'; everyone understands what is going on. Another explanation, though, is that these battles are not motivated primarily by enmity. Halsall, again, points out that '[t]he victims' of early medieval aggression 'were in some ways incidental, though the choice of target was usually justified by some real or alleged insult or wrong'. The true motivation for aggression often lay in the relationship between 'the ruler or lord and his followers or magnates'.²⁶ In early medieval societies, a man's value was determined by his prowess as a warrior, and everything worth having—status and the things that came with it: wealth, land, a desirable wife—depended on his lord's recognition of this prowess.²⁷ The king of a nation at peace could not deliver these

²⁶ Halsall, *Violence and Society*, p. 19.

²⁷ Helen Nicholson outlines the warrior's motivations at the beginning of her study of medieval warfare: 'Individual warriors became involved in war partly because they had no choice: their employer or superior demanded that they fight. On the other hand, they also fought in order to win glory and honour and so raise their prestige in society.'

things to his people, and the results could be dire.²⁸ Halsall alludes to a story in Gregory of Tours's *Historia Francorum* in which, when the Frankish king Theuderic refuses to join his brothers Lothar and Childebert in an attack against Burgundy, his men threaten to desert him, whereupon he promises them as much loot as they want if they will follow him instead to Clermont. This they do, and the army *totam regionem deuastat et proterit* 'devastates and subjugates the entire region'.²⁹ Theuderic's Franks are after glory and loot, and they don't care much where they get it. Gregory does not even bother to mention their justification (if they have one) for the attack.

The major battles of *Beowulf* have their causes: monsters have attacked, insults and injuries must be repaid. But as motivators of violence, friendly relationships within groups are at least as important as hostile relationships between enemies. An essential feature of these battles is that someone makes good, coming away from them with treasure and favour. Each of Beowulf's early monster fights is concluded with a round of gift-giving (1020–49, 1866–9), and Beowulf receives wealth and enhanced status on his return to the Geats (2190–5). Hengest carries all of Finn's belongings, including his queen, away from the battle of Finnesburh (1154–9), Beowulf carries thirty sets of battle gear away from the battle in which Higelac has fallen (2361–2), Weohstan is well rewarded for the killing of Eanmund (2616–8), and Eofor and Wulf are even more richly rewarded for the death of Ongentheow at Ravenswood (2989–98). Even the dragon fight can be read in this way, as Chapter Seven will argue: though dying, Beowulf ends

They might win wealth (land or money or other property), both from booty taken during war and from gifts from their grateful employer or lord. They would win the admiration of others, and might be able thereby to attract the attention of desirable partners, so increasing the possibility of marriage and leaving children to carry on their line. Brave deeds could be recorded in poetry or in written history, ensuring fame after one's death; likewise a marriage with many children ensured a different sort of continuation after death' (Nicholson, *Medieval Warfare*, p. 2). It should be noted that Nicholson is discussing not the early Middle Ages alone, but the period 300–1500.

²⁸ See Reuter, 'The End of Carolingian Military Expansion'.

²⁹ Levison and Krusch, *Gregorii episcopi turonensis libri historiarum X*, pp. 107–8; cited elsewhere as *HF*.

the battle in some ways better off than before. If the prospect of wealth and enhanced status is a motive for aggression among sixth-century Franks, it seems to be equally so for the warriors of *Beowulf*.

Honour

‘Honour’ is one of the most frequently used words in this book, a major project of which is to understand the ways in which honour motivates action in *Beowulf*, as characters fight to acquire, maintain or recover it. That it does so has been stated often. The idea that what the Beowulfian warrior chiefly desires is ‘fame’ or ‘glory’—Old English *ār*, *blæd*, *dōm*, *hrēð*, *lof*, *mārðo*, *tīr* or *þrymm* with various compounds (the number of relevant terms is telling)—has been around for well over a century.³⁰

I have long been uncomfortable with the words ‘fame’ and ‘glory’ as frequently employed in the literature on *Beowulf*. In starting to write this book I found myself avoiding these terms as both imprecise and overburdened with associations (for example, with paganism—see below, pp. 23–5) which I had no wish to evoke. Rather, I have chosen the word ‘honour’, which to be sure is fraught in its own way. But my choice of the word has two advantages. First, it connects us with a considerable body of useful research on honour spanning many times and cultures.³¹ Second, it

³⁰ Clark, ‘The Hero and the Theme’, p. 272, traces it as far back as the 1892 translation of *Beowulf* by Earle, *Deeds of Beowulf*, pp. xciv–xcv. Earle writes: ‘In the last clause of this inner Prologue occurs a word LOF praise, to which I attach a peculiar value. This word occurs again in the closing line of the Poem, but in the interval it appears only once, and then in a position which, whether mechanically or mentally considered, is central. More than any other word that can be named, that word LOF is the Motto of this Poem. What a prince must aim at is PRAISE, that is to say, the moral approbation of his peers.’ Earle refers to lines 24, 1513 and 3182.

³¹ The literature on honour is in fact immense and written in many languages, and I cannot pretend to be in control of all, or even most of it. For definitions of broad usefulness together with extensive bibliography, Stewart, *Honor* and Alexander Welsh, *What is Honor?* are excellent. For a survey of the Germanic field, somewhat dated, see Jones, *Honor in German Literature*. Gehl, *Ruhm und Ehre* is a trap to be avoided: for a critique see Andersson, ‘The Displacement of the Heroic Ideal in the Family Sagas’. For Iceland, W. I. Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, Byock, *Viking Age Iceland*, pp. 185–251, and Byock, ‘Feuding in Viking-Age Iceland’s Great Village’. Literary

associates the Beowulfian concept with the preoccupations of many other medieval characters, such as the heroes of the Icelandic sagas and the knights of romance. Such scholarship as William Ian Miller's *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking* and Andrew Cowell's *Medieval Warrior Aristocracy* (a study of French literature), which discuss the pursuit of honour exhaustively, leave little doubt that Beowulfian 'fame' does indeed participate in a broader medieval phenomenon.

Honour is a complex concept with many moving parts, definitions sometimes in conflict, and much variability across cultures. The definition used in this study begins with honour as the esteem in which one is held by others, measured by what they say. If one is spoken of in admiring terms, then one has great honour—'fame' or 'glory' in traditional Beowulfian terms.

To refine the definition, if 'dignity' is the respect that is one's due by virtue of being alive, human and free, 'honour' is something more, as anthropologist David Graeber explains in a discussion of slavery (understood as the violent stripping away of dignity):

. . . this ability to strip others of their dignity becomes, for the master, the foundation of his honor. . . . Men of honor tend to combine a sense of total ease and self-assurance, which comes with the habit of command, with a notorious jumpiness, a heightened sensitivity to slights and insults, the feeling that a man (and it is almost always a man) is somehow reduced, humiliated, if any 'debt of honor' is allowed to go unpaid. This is because honor is not the same as dignity. One might even say: honor is surplus dignity. It is that heightened consciousness of power, and its dangers, that comes from having stripped away the power and dignity of others; or at the very least, from the knowledge that one is capable of doing so. At its simplest, honor is that excess dignity that must be defended with the knife or sword.³²

Honour is thus closely connected to the practice of violence, the warrior's

scholarship dealing with honour will be cited throughout this book. An anthropological study that I have found useful for understanding honour in a feuding society is Boehm, *Blood Revenge*.

³² Graeber, *Debt: The First 5,000 Years*, ch. 7.

craft: it is an essential component of the identity of the fighting man.³³ Even today, the word 'honour' remains associated with violence, being especially common in military contexts: it is a property of the soldier, and also of some of the uniformed personnel who have increasingly come to be referred to as 'first responders' in a militarized post-9/11 America, particularly police officers and firefighters.³⁴

To win honour it is not enough to perform violent acts. Graeber again writes, 'the quintessence of a warrior's honor, which is a greatness that can only come from the destruction and degradation of others, is his willingness to throw himself into a game where he risks that same destruction and degradation himself' (ch. 12). One gains nothing by killing children, or burning people in their houses; one must risk both death and the dishonour of defeat.³⁵ Relatedly, one must 'play graciously, and by the rules' (*ibid.*), observing (as stated earlier) the 'shared norms' that govern violence in one's society. For an early medieval male, this usually means facing down one's enemy (as opposed to slipping up behind him or poisoning his

³³ As well understood by Shakespeare, whose Jaques says of the soldier, one of the 'parts' played by men upon the stage of life: 'Full of strange oaths, and bearded like the Pard, / Ielous in honor, sodaine, and quicke in quarrell, / Seeking the bubble Reputation / Euen in the Canons mouth' (*As You Like It* Act II Scene 7).

³⁴ 'Honour' is common in the titles of novels with military themes, such as W. E. B. Griffin's 'Honor Bound' series, David Weber's 'Honor Harrington' series, Radclyffe's 'Honor' series, and the Tom Clancy titles *Debt of Honor*, *Mission of Honor*, and *Shadow of Honor* (the last two apparently commissioned but not written by Clancy). Indeed, the word 'honour' in an American novel's title seems to function as an assurance that it will be set among soldiers, police, firefighters or intelligence agents and that it will be patriotically themed. The study of honour can be an occasion for conservative polemic, as with James Bowman's *Honor: A History* (2006). 'Honour' is also, unsurprisingly, found often in the titles of historical romances (titles gathered from <http://www.amazon.com>, accessed 29 Oct. 2011). The statement concerning the increasing popularity of the phrase 'first responders' is based on a search in the Google Ngram Viewer, <http://books.google.com/ngrams/>, accessed 29 Oct. 2011. 'Honour' does not appear to be associated with other uniformed 'first responders' such as paramedics and emergency room workers.

³⁵ Compare Alexander Welsh, *What is Honor?*, p. 4: 'For men to join in battle is generally thought to be honourable, but not if they are so situated as to be able to kill others without exposing themselves to any danger whatever.'

beer), owning one's deeds and keeping agreements. Finally, it is evident in *Beowulf* that, while a man of honour must be a good fighter, he can also win honour for other attributes: Wulfgar, the door-guard at Heorot, is widely admired for his *wīg ond wīsdōm* 'warfare and wisdom' (350).³⁶

As Miller has shown for the sagas, the assessment of one's own honour and that of others is no simple matter, and people are constantly engaged in the task. Nor is honour an exclusively 'heroic' or 'Germanic' concept. Chrétien de Troyes's *Le Chevalier de la charrette*³⁷ is a drama of honour as much as love. In the fictional world of this romance, to ride in a cart is considered a great disgrace—a stripping away of dignity—and yet Lancelot does so to forward his quest to rescue Guinevere. We judge the characters he meets along the way by their reactions to him: can they correctly assess Lancelot's honour despite his 'dishonourable' act? Chrétien carefully guides our own response to the hero: his fighting prowess, physical beauty, faithfulness to his lady, scrupulous treatment of others (including foes), and willingness to risk his honour by climbing into the cart all enlist our support. And it helps that the act from which his disgrace arises has no particular meaning for the poem's audience. If he had, say, betrayed his lord, abandoned his lady, or slain an unarmed foe, then our estimation of him might be lower: but he has only ridden in a cart. Lancelot's true fault is his hesitating *deus pas* 'two steps' (364, 4505) before climbing into the cart. It is not only a slight to his lady: for the brief moment when he feels *honte* 'shame' (4502), he is himself guilty of the same error as those who will soon be hurling insults at him.

A public challenge to one's honour must always be answered. A knight who taunts Lancelot for riding in the cart must be fought; a bed that has been declared too good for one so disgraced must be slept in. In another of Chrétien's romances, when Enide tells Erec that people are openly criticizing him for spending too much time making love to her and not enough

³⁶ The phrase is apparently, almost predictably, a formula: compare Alfred the Great's letter to Wærferth: *ond hū him ðā spēow ægðer ge mid wīge ge mid wīsdōme* 'and how they then succeeded both with warfare and with wisdom' (Sweet, *King Alfred's West-Saxon Version*, 3.8–9).

³⁷ Citations of Chrétien's romances are from Foerster, *Christian von Troyes: Sämtliche Werke*.

fighting, he sets out on a quest to regain his honour. Erec forces Enide to ride along in silence: he is angry with her as the one who has broken the bad news, but her main role is to bear witness to his deeds as the one who must validate his claim to honour.

In Icelandic sagas women play a similar role, though in a more assertive key, and there too, men look to them for affirmation.³⁸ In *Eyrbyggja Saga*, Þórarinn's mother Geirríð provokes a massacre when, having witnessed an insult to her son, she delivers that most classic of Icelandic taunts: *meir hefir þú, Þórarinn, kvenna skap en karla* 'you have more the nature of a woman than of a man, Þórarinn'.³⁹ Returning home after the slaughter, Þórarinn addresses his mother:

Varðak mik, þars myrðir
morðfárs vega þorði,
hlaut ǫrn af ná neyta
nýjum, kvinna frýju. (p. 38)

I defended myself, where the murderous one
dared to wage deadly battle
(the eagle got to choose fresh carrion
to eat), from the taunts of women.

What Þórarinn's clever skaldic syntax conceals until the last moment is that the insult that had to be acted upon was not the one delivered by the men he has just killed, but rather that of his mother (representative of 'women'). Further, his mother is the one who must now validate the outcome. *Tekit hefir þá brýningin* 'then the whetting has been effective', she observes with satisfaction (p. 39).

As he sets out for Denmark, Beowulf looks more like a volunteer than Erec and Þórarinn do, but we are told that prominent Geats *hwetton* 'whetted' him (204). And while we are not to suppose that the nation's elders have manipulated him in quite the way that Enide (hesitantly) and

³⁸ See Frank, 'Why Skalds Address Women'; Quinn, 'Women in Old Norse Poetry and Sagas'.

³⁹ Quotations of this saga are from Einar Ólafur Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, *Eyrbyggja Saga*, p. 36.

Geirrið (stridently) have done, others do precisely that, and their words and Beowulf's reactions manoeuvre him into a position where the only alternative to his winning honour is to lose it.

Unferth's challenge to Beowulf is motivated by envy (501–5), but the prediction that ends his speech can also be read as a dare:

Donne wēne ic tō þē wyrsan geþingea,
ðēah þū heaðorāsa gehwær dohte
grimre gūðe, gif þū Grendles dearest
nihtlongne fyrst nēan bīdan. (525–8)⁴⁰

And so I expect a worse result for you,
though you have prevailed in battle rushes and fierce
warfare everywhere, if you dare to await
Grendel nearby all night long.

Unferth may not intend his rude speech as a whetting, but that is its effect: it threatens Beowulf's honour, and the only answer that can rescue it is that he will indeed confront Grendel (601–6). Hrothgar is pleased with Beowulf's speech (607–10), though he has in the course of it insulted Unferth and the whole Danish aristocracy: the king likes the vow to act. Wealhtheow appears next, and though she is far more gracious than Unferth, her speech (reported as indirect discourse) is no less a whetting. She presents a cup to Beowulf:

Grētte Gēata lēod, Gode þancode
wīsfæst wordum þæs ðe hire se willa gelamp
þæt hēo on ānigne eorl gelyfde
fyrena frōfre. (625–8)

She greeted the Geatish man, thanked God,

⁴⁰ Quotations of *Beowulf* are based on consultation of several editions: Klaeber, *Beowulf*, vol. 4 of Krapp and Dobbie, *Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records*, Mitchell and Robinson, *Beowulf*, Kiernan, *Electronic Beowulf* and Fulk, Bjork, and Niles, *Klaeber's Beowulf*. A single quotation may select readings from more than one of these. Capitalization and punctuation are often mine. Except where noted otherwise, all quotations of Old English poems other than *Beowulf* are based on the texts in Krapp and Dobbie, *Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records*, sometimes with revised punctuation and capitalization.

secure in the wisdom of her words, that the pleasure
should befall her of believing in relief from violence
from any man.

Wealhtheow's public expression of confidence is in counterpoint to Unferth's expression of doubt, but it has a similar effect, raising the stakes by attributing to Beowulf a degree of honour that he can maintain only by fighting and winning. As he takes the cup, Beowulf's formal vow to do or die (632–8) is just what we expect; but if he were having doubts, Wealhtheow's speech and the vow it has elicited would make it impossible to back out. Like Geirrið, Wealhtheow is pleased that the whetting has gone well (639–40).

Honour is an unstable commodity, always rising or falling in value. And because honour's sole ingredient is the opinion of others, the character who wishes to win it is constantly influenced by the people around him. That is why whetting works so well. Unferth and Wealhtheow merely confirm Beowulf in his determination to do what he meant to do anyway, but Erec, Þórarinn and many others (including Hengest in *Beowulf*—see Chapter Six) are spurred to action by people around them communicating a sense that honour has been lost. Few things better illustrate the social nature of violence than the way various characters promote it by invoking honour.

Peacemaking

It is impossible to discuss violence without touching on peacemaking, if only because the story of any dispute is in part the story of attempts to settle it. Despite the pervasiveness of violence, early medieval societies longed for peace⁴¹ and worked hard to achieve it. Practices surrounding the settlement of disputes have been studied extensively for Iceland, for example by Miller and Byock.⁴² Anglo-Saxon historians have a much less colourful set of

⁴¹ As well documented in Kershaw, *Peaceful Kings*, a book that appeared as this project was near completion but is essential for all wishing to understand war and peace in the early Middle Ages.

⁴² W. I. Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, 'Gift, Sale, Payment, Raid'; Byock, 'Feuding in Viking-Age Iceland's Great Village', *Medieval Iceland*.

materials to work with, but the settlement of disputes in that country has been studied by Wormald and others; and there is a sizeable literature for Europe generally.⁴³

It is well known that *Beowulf* takes a pessimistic view of peacemaking. The hero's famous statement,

Oft seldan hwār
 æfter lēodhryre lýtle hwīle
 bongār būgeð, þēah sēo brȳd dūge! (2029–31)

Very seldom anywhere,
 after the fall of a king, does the deadly spear rest
 even for a little while, though the bride is good!

refers to marriage for the purpose of peacemaking only by way of a concessive clause; its broader claim is that the fall of a king will *always* be followed by revenge-taking. And it is, in *Beowulf*, as killing answers killing in the Swedish-Geatish wars, and peacemaking fails in the Finn episode (see Chapter Six) and also (according to Beowulf's prediction) in the Freawaru episode (see pp. 63 and 155–66).

But peacemaking does not always fail, even in *Beowulf*. Hrothgar tells how he once paid compensation on behalf of Beowulf's father Ecgtheow after he had killed one Heatholaf (see pp. 186–7), a story that hints at the importance of peacemaking even in a warrior culture: Hrothgar's generosity earned him the loyalty, affirmed by oaths, of an *æþele ordfruma* 'noble war-leader' (263, 472), and the expectation of good service from the son of the man he helped.

What does one purchase by handing over gold—or a daughter—to an enemy? William Ian Miller's *Eye for an Eye*, a study of the law of talion in which Anglo-Saxon and Norse sources figure prominently, would seem to answer that people, their limbs and their lives must be paid for with the same, or with an equivalent in money or property. People could even be used as money (or at least as a unit for measuring value):

⁴³ See e.g. Wormald, 'Charters, Law', the essays in Bossy, *Disputes and Settlements* and several of the essays in Brown and Górecki, *Conflict in Medieval Europe*. But much of the literature about violence and dispute is implicitly about peacemaking as well.

As late as the nineteenth century, Russians (and also slave-owning Americans) measured the value of estates in units of souls, that is, serfs or slaves. One had a 300-soul estate or a 2,000-soul estate. The early Irish laws measured value in units of slave girls, and there is reason to believe slave girls at times also served as a means of payment. (ch. 3)

On the other hand, David Graeber reports on research by the French anthropologist Philippe Rospabé suggesting that it is never possible to put a price on a life: people and goods simply can't be equated.⁴⁴ Only a person who, like the Irish slave girl, has had her freedom and dignity stripped away can be bought, sold and used as money. If no price-tag can be hung on a human being, then bride-price is not the value of a bride, *wergild* 'man-price' is not the value of a homicide victim, and compensation is not the payment of any such value. It is more likely to be as Lewis Henry Morgan observed among the Iroquois in the nineteenth century:

The present of white wampum was not in the nature of a compensation for the life of the deceased, but of a regretful confession of the crime, with a petition for forgiveness. It was a peace-offering, the acceptance of which was pressed by mutual friends.⁴⁵

The Montenegrin settlement rituals described by Christopher Boehm⁴⁶ feature extravagant gestures of submission and self-abasement and displays of the wealth ostensibly meant to be paid as compensation; but once the wrongs on both sides have been tabulated and their value assessed, quite often little property has changed hands. It is hard to escape the sense that the payment of compensation is almost beside the point, the real work of settlement being performed by the consent of the parties and the witness of God (the priest being in attendance) and the community. In *Njáls Saga*, community is also an essential feature in the famous settlement for the killing of Hǫskuld Hvítanesgoði arranged by Snorri the Priest, who sets the compensation higher than has ever been paid for any man in Iceland and stipulates that all must be paid immediately, forcing many

⁴⁴ Graeber, *Debt: The First 5,000 Years*, ch. 6.

⁴⁵ Quoted *ibid.*, ch. 6

⁴⁶ *Blood Revenge*, pp. 133–7.

of those present at the Alþing to contribute.⁴⁷ That this settlement falls apart does not invalidate Snorri's calculation, which was intended to give the community a stake in its success.

An interesting feature of Snorri's attempted settlement is that the cost does not fall exclusively, or even primarily, on the killers. This is not uncommon in the settlements described in the sagas.⁴⁸ In *Beowulf*, Hrothgar pays compensation for Hondscioh, the member of Beowulf's party killed by Grendel (1053–5). The gesture looks like one of pure generosity. But in *Egils Saga*⁴⁹ a similar scene unfolds with interesting differences. After Egil's brother Þórólf has fallen in the service of Æthelstan of England, the poet sits opposite the king in the royal hall, glowering and fiddling with his sword. Noticing this, Æthelstan takes a ring from his arm and passes it to Egil over the fire on the point of his sword; then Egil's mood lightens. Later Æthelstan has two chests of silver brought in and gives them to Egil as compensation for his brother. Egil's behaviour says plainly that he expects something from Æthelstan, but is that something *lof* 'praise' for his valour (this is how Egil interprets the ring in the verse he composes to acknowledge the gift) or compensation for his brother? And by what logic do Hrothgar and Æthelstan become liable for killings committed by others?

If compensation does not pay over the 'replacement value' of a victim, perhaps it also does not function as punishment for the perpetrator—who in each of our cases is beyond the reach of vengeance. Rather, it is a public recognition of a loss that cannot be restored. For the *mærum maguþegne* 'excellent retainer' Hondscioh, and even more for the great warrior Þórólf, who has died with his honour intact (see below, pp. 206–9), it is also a recognition of the deeds he has done, a posthumous analogue of the king's bestowal of gifts after a battle. Finally, it is a restoration of what *can* be restored: the honour that one loses when a kinsman or retainer is killed. Neither Beowulf nor Egil need face the shame of returning home one man short with nothing to show for it. Looked at this way, the distinction

⁴⁷ Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, *Brennu-Njáls Saga*, ch. 123.

⁴⁸ See W. I. Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, p. 287: 'Those awards that were paid in full were often partially or wholly funded by third parties.'

⁴⁹ Nordal, *Egils Saga*, ch. 55, pp. 143–5.

between Æthelstan's gift of a ring to Egil and his payment of compensation for Þórólf is not so sharp as it seemed at first: the two gifts perform the same sort of work.

We see in the sagas that payment of compensation involves complex calculations which are far more social than mathematical in nature; and the same is likely to be true in any society that resolves disputes in this way, including Anglo-Saxon England. The same is true of peacemaking generally, however earnestly undertaken. If it were simply a matter of paying out the right amount of gold, arranging a marriage, giving a gift or exchanging oaths and hostages, early medieval Europe and its literature would have been far less violent.

Religion and violence

By way of situating *Beowulf* among the warlike cultures of the early Middle Ages, this study cites a wide variety of texts. Some (like the sermons of Caesarius of Arles) are Christian devotional works while others (like the Norse *Hákonarmál*) are pagan, or purport to be. The religious diversity of these texts is intentional: literary representations of violence are broadly similar across the cultures of northern Europe regardless of the religious beliefs of authors and audiences. This is not to say that there were no differences between the violent practices of, say, tenth-century pagan Norwegians and tenth-century Christian Englishmen. There certainly were, and these sometimes found religious expression (see the comments on oaths above). But we should not assume that all such differences had a religious connection, and we should avoid confusing correlation with causation.

Many scholars have associated paganism with violence, though they do not always put it that way. In 1928, Bertha S. Phillpotts tried to identify some elements of a 'pagan attitude to life' distinct from worship of the old gods. Among these were the code of 'loyalty to a chief', the duty of vengeance, and the pursuit of fame.⁵⁰ These are values belonging to the social context in which violence is practiced, and this study will have much to say about them. The idea that such values, though not obviously religious,

⁵⁰ 'Wyrd and Providence in Anglo-Saxon Thought', pp. 7, 10–11, 14–15.

are pagan has had a good bit of currency, though some have argued for caution.⁵¹ The pursuit of fame (called ‘honour’ in this study—see above, p. 12) can serve as an example. J. R. R. Tolkien, discussing the concepts *lof* ‘praise’ and *dōm* ‘glory’, writes that ‘*lof* remains pagan *lof*, the praise of one’s peers’.⁵² Agreeing with Tolkien, Fred C. Robinson writes that ‘Beowulf’s speech to Hrothgar declaring that the best thing a person can do in this life is to achieve fame (1387–9) would jar rudely with the ideal of Christian humility’, and Andy Orchard writes that the texts of the *Beowulf* manuscript ‘all are concerned with the relationship between pagan past and Christian present, and with the tension between an age which extolled heroic glory and an age in which vainglory was condemned’.⁵³ There is, indeed, ‘tension’ between the desire for honour and Christian doctrine, and Anglo-Saxon authors wrote about it. For example, Alcuin’s *Liber de virtutibus et vitiis* warns against the deadly sin of vainglory (*uana gloria*), the wish to be praised for one’s deeds or good qualities without giving any credit to God; everything the vainglorious man does is for the sole purpose of being praised by others.⁵⁴ It is well known that Old English *lofgeorn* ‘eager for praise’, used to praise Beowulf at his funeral (3182) means ‘vainglorious’ in a Christian context.⁵⁵

That the desire for honour is condemned by Christian writers, however, does not in itself make it more pagan than other appetites regarded by the same writers as sinful: gluttony, say, or avarice. The pursuit of honour is characteristic of many cultures; I have argued above that the honour that the Beowulfian hero yearns for is related to the concept found in other medieval literature. Even later, in Shakespeare’s *Henry IV Part 1*, the value of honour is demonstrated through the negative example of Falstaff (‘What is Honour? A word. What is that word Honour? Ayre’—Act V Scene 1),

⁵¹ See especially Wormald, ‘Bede, *Beowulf*’, pp. 38–48.

⁵² J. R. R. Tolkien, ‘*Beowulf*: The Monsters and the Critics’, p. 262.

⁵³ Robinson, ‘History, Religion, Culture’, pp. 41–2; A. Orchard, *Pride and Prodigies*, p. 169.

⁵⁴ The *Liber de Virtutibus et Vitiis* is printed *PL* ci.613–38. On vainglory, see 635–6; on humility, 619–20.

⁵⁵ For the debate on the meaning of *lofgeornost* in *Beowulf*, see the references in A. Orchard, *Critical Companion*, p. 66 n. 47.

who in the end is repudiated as an unworthy companion for a king.

In the eighteenth century Henry Fielding wrote of the pursuit of honour and saw in it a theological problem similar to that identified by Robinson and Orchard. When Tom Jones, as army recruit, is wounded (hit on the head with a bottle) defending Sophia Western's virtuous reputation, a lieutenant urges him to challenge the offender to a duel. Reluctant, Tom searches for a way out. "But how terrible it must be," cries *Jones*, "to any one who is really a Christian, to cherish Malice in his Breast, in Opposition to the Command of him who hath expressly forbid it?"⁵⁶ The lieutenant has anticipated this objection:

'Why I believe there is such a Command,' cries the Lieutenant; 'but a Man of Honour can't keep it. And you must be a Man of Honour, if you will be in the Army. I remember I once put the Case to our Chaplain over a Bowl of Punch, and he confessed there was much Difficulty in it; but he said, he hoped there might be a Latitude granted to Soldiers in this one Instance; and to be sure it is our Duty to hope so: For who would bear to live without his Honour? No, no, my dear Boy, be a good Christian as long as you live; but be a Man of Honour too, and never put up an Affront; not all the Books, nor all the Parsons in the World, shall ever persuade me to that. I love my Religion very well, but I love my Honour more. There must be some Mistake in the wording the Text, or in the Translation, or in the understanding it, or somewhere or other. But however that be, a Man must run the Risque, for he must preserve his Honour.'⁵⁷

The 'Honour' that Fielding makes fun of is entirely about reputation: like the hero of an Icelandic saga, the lieutenant finds it intolerable that anyone should have occasion to say that he has suffered an insult without taking revenge; rather, honour must be recovered by the performance of violent deeds. And here too the pursuit of honour is seen as in conflict with Christian values, though the deadly sin at issue is ire rather than vainglory.

Everywhere one looks in western literature, from the ancient to the modern, from poems to plays to novels, one encounters men and women contending to maintain, recover and enhance their honour. Whether the

⁵⁶ Fielding, *The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling*, p. 383.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.* p. 384.

pursuit of honour is viewed as a good or bad thing, it is so pervasive as a literary theme that it seems unnecessary to look to the 'pagan attitude to life' for an explanation of the particular variant of it on display in *Beowulf*. Rather, it is an enduring theme with a dynamic relationship to the shifting realities in which people live and die; by the time *Beowulf* was composed it had surely, under a variety of cultural pressures (some of them presumably religious), become something at least subtly different from what it had been before the Anglo-Saxon conversion to Christianity.

Readers of *Beowulf* and other early medieval texts are often tempted by a narrative in which the impulse towards pagan savagery (usually exemplified by the vikings) is tamed, over time, by the Christian message of peace: the ethic of the warband, the desire for revenge, the glorification of predatory war-making, are all subdued by the new faith. But it is hard to demonstrate that anything like this happened during the period when *Beowulf* is likeliest to have been written. It is even hard to identify pressures in this direction coming from the Church or elsewhere.

This is not to say that the Church was not interested in issues of war and peace; it was, and early medieval theologians had interesting things to say about them. Sedulius Scottus, in his *De Rectoribus Christianis* (On Christian Rulers), written for Lothar II (d. 869), numbers among the seven most beautiful things in God's creation *rex pacificus in gloria regni sui, quando in aula regia ostensis muneribus donisque traditis multa beneficia praestat* 'a peaceful king in the glory of his kingdom, when in the royal palace he bestows many benefits by displaying gifts and distributing grants'⁵⁸—a formulation that calls to mind the peaceful reigns of Hrothgar and Beowulf (1769–73, 2732–6). Sedulius's exemplars of the *rex pacificus* are Caesar Augustus, the Antonines, Constantine the Great, Theodosius I and II, Charlemagne and Louis the Pious. Of these rulers, not one enjoyed a reign free of war, and the list includes two of history's most aggressive conquerors. Clearly *pax* 'peace' must have different meanings for Sedulius and the typical modern reader.

Fortunately, Sedulius is quite clear about what he considers peace to be. *Fructus autem pacificae mentis est erga subiectos et amicos benignam os-*

⁵⁸ Quotation and translation from Dyson, *Sedulius De rectoribus*, pp. 102–3.

tendere misericordiam simul et clementiam 'And the fruit of the peaceful mind is to show bounteous mercy, together also with clemency towards subjects and friends'.⁵⁹ Peace has to do with the maintenance of domestic tranquility and international alliances; it need not involve making peace with enemies or refraining from aggression.⁶⁰ Bede considered the *pax* of the reign of Eadwine, the first Christian king of Northumbria, to be so great that a woman could travel unmolested with a newborn child from sea to sea (*HE* ii.16). It was possible, though, to make such a journey across the island, with or without a baby, only because of the expansionist policies of the seventh-century kings of Northumbria, who conquered the British kingdoms to their west; and Eadwine was among the most aggressive and successful of these.⁶¹

Hincmar, bishop of Reims, offered a condensed version of Augustine's thinking about warfare (what has since come to be called 'Just War Theory') for Charles the Bald in his *De regis persona et regio ministerio* (On the King's Character and the Royal Office). Addressing the question of

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* pp. 104–5.

⁶⁰ Sedulius's Ch. xv is especially interesting in this connection. It recommends trusting in God rather than in physical arms (*armis corporalibus*); the result will be that God makes the land's borders peaceful, so that none may terrify the people (quoting Leviticus 26:6). But what Sedulius envisions is not peace in the modern sense, for God promises further *Persequemini inimicos uestros, et corruent coram uobis. Persequentur quinque de uestris centum alienos, et centum ex uobis decem millia. Cadent inimici uestri in conspectu uestro gladio* 'You shall pursue your enemies, and they shall fall before you. Five of yours shall pursue a hundred others, and a hundred of you ten thousand; your enemies shall fall before you by the sword' (quoting Leviticus 26:7–8; *ibid.* pp. 152–3, but I follow Hellmann, *Sedulius Scottus*, p. 70 for the punctuation of the last sentence). Sedulius's examples in this chapter confirm that God rewards his faithful not with an absence of warfare (except to the extent that one's enemies are cowed by military superiority), but rather with victory.

⁶¹ Quotations from and translations of Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* (abbreviated *HE*) are from Colgrave and Mynors, *Bede's Ecclesiastical History* except where stated otherwise. For an extended discussion of this passage in *HE* see Kershaw, *Peaceful Kings*, pp. 31–9. For Northumbrian expansion in the seventh century see Yorke, *Kings and Kingdoms*, pp. 74–86; for Eadwine's career and his conquest of the British kingdom of Elmet, see Higham, *Kingdom of Northumbria*, pp. 77–83 and Kirby, *The Earliest English Kings*, pp. 77–88.

whether it is ever good for a king to initiate a war or expand his territory, he appeals to *De ciuitate dei* iv.15:

Bella gerere, et dilatare regnum, bonos sola necessitate uocari, ex libro Augustini de ciuitate Dei: 'Belligerare, et perdomitis gentibus dilatare regnum, malis uidetur felicitas, bonis necessitas. Sed quia peius esset ut iniuriosi iustioribus dominarentur, ideo non incongrue dicitur etiam ista felicitas. Sed proculdubio felicitas maior est, uicinum bonum habere concordem, quam uicinum malum subiugare bellantem. Mala uota sunt optare habere quem oderis, uel quem timeas, ut possit esse quem uincas.'⁶²

To make war and expand the kingdom are called good things only by necessity, from Augustine's book *De ciuitate dei*: 'to make war and extend one's dominion over conquered peoples seems a felicity to the bad but a necessity to the good. But since it would be worse for the unjust to rule the just, even that is, without inconsistency, called a felicity. But without a doubt it is a greater felicity to have a good neighbour at peace than to subjugate a bad neighbour at war. It is a bad wish to desire to have one whom you hate, or whom you fear, in such a position that he can be one whom you conquer.'

Among Augustine's various pronouncements on war which Hincmar could have cited,⁶³ this must surely be the most permissive, seeking to regulate not so much the waging of war as the state of mind of those who wage it, and seeming to license any king who considers himself more just than his neighbours to launch wars of conquest. Indeed, much of Hincmar's tract seems an apology for aggressive kingship, an argument that war is not displeasing to God.⁶⁴

Both Hincmar and Sedulius had connections with royal courts. So had Alcuin, who in more than 300 letters recorded his opinions on many topics, including warfare and kingly power. Alcuin sees power as given by God for good purposes, as he writes to Charlemagne:

Dum dignitas imperialis a Deo ordinata, ad nil aliud exaltata esse uidetur, nisi populo praeesse et prodesse: proinde datur a Deo electis potestas et

⁶² *PL* cxxv.840.

⁶³ E.g. *De ciuitate dei* xv.4, xix.7 (ed. Dombart and Kalb, ii. 63–4, 383–4).

⁶⁴ *PL* cxxv.840–4

sapientia: potestas, ut superbos opprimat, et defendat ab improbis humiles; sapientia, ut regat et doceat pia sollicitudine subiectos. His duobus, sancte imperator, muneribus diuina uestram incomparabiliter sublimitatem, eiusdem nominis et numinis antecessoribus gratia superexaltauit et honorauit, terrorem potentiae uestrae super omnes undique gentes inmittens, ut uoluntaria subiectione ad uos ueniant, quos prioribus bellicus labor temporibus sibi subdere non potuit.

Forasmuch as imperial rank is ordained by God, its purpose must be to lead and serve the people; hence power and wisdom is given by God to his chosen, power to crush the arrogant and defend the lowly against the wicked, and wisdom to rule and teach his subjects with virtuous care. With these two gifts, holy Emperor, divine grace has raised your Majesty to honour incomparably beyond your predecessors of the same name and power, sending the terror of your might upon all nations everywhere that they should come in voluntary submission, when in the past the labour of war could not bring them into subjection.⁶⁵

He especially sees the Saxon and Avar wars as just efforts to bring Christianity to the pagans;⁶⁶ he has less to say about wars of conquest against Christian populations. What makes a king worthy to serve as God's military arm and be granted success in battle, as he writes to Charlemagne's son Pepin, is eagerness to honour God and do his will:

Et tu, excellentissime iuuenis, nobilitatem generationis morum nobilitate adornare studeas: et Dei omnipotentis uoluntatem atque honorem tota uirtute implere contende, quatenus illius ineffabilis pietas solium regni tui exaltet et terminos dilatet, et gentes tuae subiciat potestati.

Be earnest, excellent youth, to grace nobility of birth with nobility of conduct, and strive with all your might to honour and obey Almighty God, that his ineffable goodness may uplift your throne, extend your kingdom and bring the nations under your power. (Letter 119)

⁶⁵ Quotations of Alcuin's letters (cited by letter-number) are from Dümmler, *Epistolae karolini aevi tomus ii*; translations (where available) from Allott, *Alcuin of York*. This is letter 257.

⁶⁶ See especially letters 99, 107 and 110.

One of the most revealing (for our purposes) of Alcuin's letters is a response to a query by a *miles* (a soldier, a layman, presumably a nobleman) passed on by Charlemagne.⁶⁷ The soldier asks whether it is an inconsistency that in Luke 22:36 Christ tells his disciples to buy a sword, but in Matthew 26:52, a short time later, he tells the disciple who has just cut off a man's ear to put away his sword; *omnes enim qui acceperint gladium gladio peribunt* 'for all that take the sword shall perish with the sword'.⁶⁸ Excellent biblical query from a warrior! The greatest part of Alcuin's reply is a tour of swords in the Gospels and the Fathers, a fine display of erudition from the days before the Chadwyck-Healey *Patrologia Latina* database made it almost too easy. But before he commences the tour, he introduces the idea that words can have different meanings at different places in the scriptures, his first example being *leo* 'lion':

Non enim aequaliter ubique gladius significat, itaque sicut leo aliter significat, ubi dicitur: 'Ecce uicit leo de tribu Iuda', aliter, ubi dicitur: 'Circuit quasi leo, quaerens quem deuoret'—ille leo Christus est, iste diabolus.

'Sword' does not mean the same thing everywhere, just as 'lion' means one thing where it says, 'behold the lion of the tribe of Judah hath prevailed' (Apocalypse 5:5) and another where it says 'as a roaring lion, [he] goeth about seeking whom he may devour' (1 Peter 5:8)—the former lion is Christ, the latter the devil.

The Lion of Judah stands for Christ, as Alcuin says; it is *radix David* 'the root of David' (Apocalypse 5:5), origin of the line that includes the great king of Israel, as Charlemagne must have known very well. Being descended from Judah and David, Christ is figured as a warlike saviour, whose opening the book and loosing the seven seals is a victory.⁶⁹ Alcuin's favourite nickname for Charlemagne is David (this very letter is addressed *David*

⁶⁷ Letter 136, partly translated in Allott, *Alcuin of York*, pp. 80–2. Translations of this letter are mine.

⁶⁸ All biblical quotations are from Weber and Fischer, *Biblia sacra*. Translations are from *The Douay-Reims Bible* at <http://www.drbo.org/>.

⁶⁹ This is standard theology; for example, see Haymo, *Expositio in Apocalipsin* II.v: *Leo appellatur Christus per significationem, quia uictor a mortuis resurrexit. Agnus propter uictimationem, quia oblatus est pro nobis in cruce. De tribu Juda, quia uidelicet ex semine Iudae descendit David, de cujus stirpe fuit beata uirgo Maria, ideoque radix David appel-*

regi ‘to King David’); in another letter (181) Charlemagne is allegorically *leo* ‘the lion’. Thus Alcuin begins his exposition with a learned biblical compliment for his patron, imagined as God’s triumphant champion and Satan’s foe.

Having introduced the concept of polysemy in scripture with his example of the lion and several others, Alcuin anticipates a possible objection from a practical-minded soldier who holds that a sword is just a sword:

Sed forsitan ille laicus, qui in uno solebat pugnare gladio, unam eum putabat habere interpretationem, non considerans illum ipsum, quem manu tenet, ancipitem esse. In quo et inimico uitam auferre nititur et suam defendere gaudet.

But perhaps this layman, who is accustomed to fight with just one sword, thinks that it has just one interpretation, not considering that this very thing that he holds in his hand is ambiguous. With it he strives to take the life of a foe and rejoices to defend himself.

What we see abundantly on display here is Alcuin’s consciousness that in Charlemagne and his nobles he is addressing people who are above all else warriors: to explain his theological points he begins in their thought-world, a task made easier in this case by the fact that the subject is swords.

One might perhaps think that a query about Matthew 26:52 should provide the perfect opportunity to press the Christian message of peace, but in what follows Alcuin does not. Nor does he do so in his other letters, although he sometimes urges moderation in the treatment of prisoners and conquered peoples.⁷⁰ Alcuin, like other Anglo-Saxon churchmen of high rank, belonged to a nobility which was, fundamentally, a warrior elite, and though he was as sophisticated a theologian as anyone of his time, his allegiance was to his king and his class as much as to the Church. As Patrick Wormald wrote more than thirty years ago, the Anglo-Saxon

latur ‘Christ is called a lion by signification, because he rose from death as a victor. He is called a lamb because of his sacrifice, for he was offered for us on the cross. He is of the tribe of Judah because David descends from the seed of Judah, from whose family came the blessed virgin Mary, and so he is called “the root of David”’ (*PL* cxvii. 1018).

⁷⁰ Letters 110, 111, 118.

(and, he might have added, the Frankish) nobility ‘had no intention of abandoning its culture, or seriously changing its way of life’,⁷¹ despite its enthusiastic embrace of Christianity—and its way of life was warlike.

Few in the upper strata of English and Frankish society read Augustine and the other Fathers for themselves; rather, religious doctrine was mediated for them by figures like Alcuin, Sedulius, Hincmar and many more, including a tribe of anonymous homilists—local theologians, one might call them, some of great sophistication, some much less. The relationship of such writers to the secular societies they served is complex. As is well understood, the more sophisticated of them disapproved of tales like *Beowulf*, whose heroes were pagan and wailing in hell.⁷² Yet it is hard to find in the works of any of them signs that they disapproved of the warlike values that these tales celebrated and promoted, or any hint at all that they imagined the possibility of a world organized along more peaceable lines.

Heroic narrative

I use the word ‘heroic’ frequently in this book to describe the kind of poetry I understand *Beowulf* to be: that which tells of the (mostly violent) deeds performed by warriors and heroes. For my purposes, no more elaborate definition seems necessary. For the early and central Middle Ages poetic examples include (in addition to *Beowulf*) *Waldere* and *The Battle of Finnesburh* in Old English, several of the Eddic poems in Old Icelandic, *Das Hildebrandslied* in Old High German, the *Waltharius* in Latin and *La Chanson de Roland* in Old French. Some prose works also qualify as heroic under my expansive definition: for example, the ‘Cynewulf and Cyneheard’ entry in *ASC*, the Icelandic *fornaldarsögur*, and even some of the *Íslendinga sögur*. Nor does the production of heroic literature come to a halt in the later Middle Ages. The subject matter shifts (Germanic legendary heroes give way to Charlemagne, Arthur and figures drawn from the classics) and many heroic poems are influenced by the newer genre of romance or ro-

⁷¹ Wormald, ‘Bede, *Beowulf*’, p. 57.

⁷² *Ibid.* pp. 42–8; see Alcuin’s letter 124: *ille paganus perditus plangit in inferno* ‘that lost pagan wails in hell’ (my translation). For a reading of this letter with important qualifications of the usual reading, see Garrison, “Quid Hinieldus cum Christo?”

mances by the heroic (e.g. *Das Nibelungenlied*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*). But Middle English works from Lazamon's *Brut* to the *Alliterative Morte Arthur* show plainly that heroic literature was enjoyed by medieval audiences from the beginning of the period to the end.

I bring up these elementary points because numerous scholars have argued that *Beowulf* displays evidence of the decline, or even the rejection, of heroic values or Germanic legend in Anglo-Saxon England. The argument has been made in various ways that the heroic was coming to seem problematic by the time of the poem's composition, or at least by the time our sole manuscript was written.⁷³ In a particularly compelling argument (because it aspires to objective measurement), Patrick Wormald shows that parents gave their children the names of legendary heroes less often in late than in early Anglo-Saxon England. Here he identifies a real cultural phenomenon—naming customs changed—but what does it mean? When parents stopped naming their children after Germanic legendary heroes, did they instead begin to name them after *other* heroes? It appears not. Rather, the fashion shifted away from naming children after literary characters of any kind. Wormald adds in conclusion, 'There is no escaping the evidence that the *celebration* of pagan heroes was discouraged by born-again idealists of the early medieval West.'⁷⁴ This is undeniable.

And yet: the hero of the Old English *Waldere* and Latin *Waltharius*, Gunther and the other non-Hunnish characters in *Das Nibelungenlied*, and even Hildebrand and Hadubrand of *Das Hildebrandslied* are depicted as Christian. They make up a significant proportion of the legendary heroes whose stories we possess. Even if, as has been suggested, *Waltharius* and *Das Hildebrandslied* are reworkings of pagan originals,⁷⁵ that simply

⁷³ For example, Leyerle, 'Beowulf the Hero and King'; Berger and Leicester, 'Social Structure as Doom'; Davis, *Beowulf and the Demise of Germanic Legend*; A. Orchard, *Pride and Prodigies* (to mention only works already listed in this book's bibliography).

⁷⁴ Wormald, 'Bede, *Beowulf*', pp. 71–81.

⁷⁵ Brunhölzl, 'Waltharius und kein Ende?', p. 50 argues that *Waltharius* is a translation of a pagan Old High German original: Walthari belongs to 'zwei grundverschiedene Wertordnungen', Christian and pagan, which are irreconcilable. I find such arguments from value systems utterly unpersuasive. In his translation of the *Hildebrandslied* frag-

shows how easy it was to Christianize old pagan heroes. Beowulf and Hrothgar seem halfway Christianized already. Christian legendary heroes like Waldere would eventually disappear from the English literary record along with the pagan ones. Other heroes (not a few of them pagan) would take their place, performing other violent deeds.

And further: the manuscripts that inform us of the Anglo-Saxon taste for legendary heroes all date from the late tenth to the early eleventh centuries. This does not mean that heroic legend was unknown in the earlier period (we have that tantalizing allusion to Ingeld in one of Alcuin's letters, above, n. 72), but it does seem to testify to a lively interest in such stories at a time when literary tastes were supposedly turning in other directions. Colin Chase in 'Beowulf, Bede, and St. Oswine' even suggests that interest in heroic themes was on the increase in late Anglo-Saxon England. While I do not regard the case that Chase lays out as proven, it is surely not incredible that, at a period when government was becoming more bureaucratic and kings more remote, audiences might have been more rather than less interested in tales of a supposedly simpler time, when the ties that mattered were personal.

And finally: what other kinds of secular narrative were people of, say, the early eleventh century consuming, if they no longer appreciated heroic narrative? Did they listen to and read only religious poems (many of which employed heroic conventions)? Is the *Apollonius of Tyre* fragment the sole surviving evidence of a flourishing market for translations from late ancient romance? Did they forego secular narrative and just listen to riddles and elegies, or the odd topical poem like *The Battle of Maldon* (which also employs heroic conventions)? There is as yet no sighting of romance; King Arthur is not on the radar screen. It seems incredible that for two or more centuries the generic slot labelled 'secular narrative' should have been filled only by works no one liked; but that is, in essence, what a number of critics have suggested.

It seems probable to me that at the time of the *Beowulf* manuscript heroic narrative was as popular as it had ever been, the heroes of legend still

ment into Langobardic, Krogmann, *Das Hildebrandslied*, pp. 46–9 substitutes *Wodan* for *irringot* (28) and *waltant got* (42).

well known to a wide audience, even if naming conventions had changed.⁷⁶ Indeed, I have little doubt that heroic narrative was popular throughout the Anglo-Saxon period. And so I have not thought it necessary to engage with the vexed question of the date of *Beowulf*—concerning which, in any case, I often change my mind. For the purposes of this study it does not matter much.

⁷⁶ John D. Niles, Niles, *Old English Heroic Poems*, pp. 57–8, arrives at a similar place with a good bit more theoretical sophistication: ‘the poem serves as an example, the only one that has happened to survive almost intact, of a type of narrative literature that probably retained cultural centrality until fairly late in the Anglo-Saxon period, bearing the intellectual brunt of such changes in society as occurred over time’.

CHAPTER TWO

Loot and the Economy of Honour

IN THE SHORT Latin epic *Waltharius*, written in ninth- or tenth-century Germany, perhaps as an entertainment for clerics,¹ the eponymous hero, having killed eleven men in successive single combats—some while fleeing or begging for mercy—picks the corpses:

Aggreditur iuuenis caesos spoliariis armis
armorumque habitu, tunicas et cetera linquens:
armillas tantum cum bullis, baltea et enses,
loricas quoque cum galeis detraxerat ollis.
Quatuor his oneravit equos sponsamque uocatam
imposuit quinto, sextum condescenderat ipse.²

The young man proceeds to strip the slain of their arms and armour, leaving their tunics and other things: from them he took just armlets and brooches, belts and swords, mail coats, too, and helmets.

¹ The date, authorship, provenance and audience of *Waltharius* are controversial: for a brief summary of the major positions with references, see Millet, *Waltharius – Gaiferos*, pp. 22–6. See also P. Dronke, ‘Waltharius-Gaiferos’ and the literature cited above, p. 32, n. 75. Fortunately, what I have to say about the *Waltharius* does not depend on particulars such as these.

² Lines 1191–6. Quoted from Strecker, *Die lateinischen Dichter*, pp. 72–3, but I have repunctuated 1193, which in Strecker’s edition reads *armillas tantum, cum bullis baltea et enses*. Translations of this poem are mine, but I have consulted Magoun and Smyser, *Walter of Aquitaine*, Langosch, *Waltharius*, Ruodlieb and Kratz, *Waltharius and Ruodlieb*.

He loaded four horses with these, called his betrothed
and set her on the fifth, and mounted the sixth himself.

These men have lost their ornaments, their horses, their battle-gear and their lives in a dispute over treasure, which unfolded as follows. Walthari has been a hostage at the court of Attila the Hun since childhood. In a splendid example of the narrative formula in which hostages fight for their captors,³ he has long been Attila's greatest champion and the author of all his victories. Immediately after a great battle, from which Walthari's triumphant army of Huns has returned with its loot, he plots to flee Attila's court along with Hiltgunt, another hostage, whom he plans to marry. They steal away by night, taking with them Attila's own helmet and mail-coat and two boxes heavy with golden Hunnish arm-rings. The fugitives' route takes them to the vicinity of Worms, the seat of Gunthari, king of the Franks, who sees their arrival with so much treasure as an opportunity to recover the tribute that his father long ago was forced to hand over to Attila. Brushing aside the misgivings of his retainer Hagano, himself formerly a hostage at Attila's court and well acquainted with Walthari, Gunthari assembles a troop consisting of himself, Hagano, and eleven others and rides forth to seize the treasure. Battles ensue, and now the corpses of the eleven, stripped to their tunics, litter the battlefield as Walthari, having added their treasure to what he stole from the Huns, rides to his climactic battle with Hagano and Gunthari. The poem will end with the three great warriors maimed but reconciled, dividing the treasure among themselves.

The passage quoted above, and indeed the whole of *Waltharius*, raises a number of questions about the circulation of treasure in heroic narrative. Given the well known horror of theft in Germanic societies,⁴ how does the poem justify Walthari's stealing away with so much of the Hunnish treasury? Why does he leave the corpses of the men he has killed in their tunics, and why is it worth mentioning that he does so? Finally, and crucially, what, beyond mere possession of wealth, is at stake for Walthari, Gunthari and Hagano in the competition for treasure that is so central to this poem?

³ See especially *ASC* A 755 and *The Battle of Maldon* 265–72.

⁴ See Andersson, 'The Thief in *Beowulf*'.

Treasure is hardly less central to *Beowulf* than to *Waltharius*, and the issues that *Waltharius* raises have their Beowulfian analogues. In both poems it is essential to understand how treasure moves from hand to hand—as gift, as has often been observed,⁵ but also as loot, the treasure seized from dead enemies, variously called booty, spoils and plunder by modern translators.⁶ Looting the slain transforms a violent deed into wealth and feeds the economic system that supports the heroic life as depicted in these and other poems. In this system, which I call the Economy of Honour (borrowing a phrase from William Ian Miller's classic study of Icelandic saga, also used by John M. Hill),⁷ treasure and honour, indissolubly bonded, are traded up and down the social hierarchy in such a way that the participants gain (and occasionally lose) honour with each transaction.

The heroic economy I am describing, if it bears any resemblance at all to the economy of Anglo-Saxon England, is a radically abbreviated version of it. Compare the kinds of wealth that circulated among the Anglo-Saxons with those that appear in *Beowulf*. At any date when the poem might plausibly have been composed, a moneyless economy would have been a distant memory, but the world of *Beowulf* gets along entirely without coinage.⁸ The poem mentions land as a reward for valorous deeds, but land seems to lack all practical value: if noble Danes and Geats collect rents in money, food or service, the poet considers the fact too trivial to no-

⁵ For a survey of scholarship on gift-exchange in *Beowulf*, see below, pp. 54–62.

⁶ In Latin sources it is called *spolia*, *exuviae* (also 'relics') or *praeda* (also 'prey'). Old English sources employ a variety of terms: *blōð* (also 'war-band, criminal gang'), *hūð*, *herehūð* (and *herehȳð*), *rēaf*, *hererēaf*, *wælrēaf*; the verb is *rēafian*.

⁷ W. I. Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, index, s.v. 'Honor, economy of', p. 400; Hill, *Cultural World*. Though Miller uses the phrase sparingly, economic terminology is pervasive in his discussions of honour (see especially pp. 29–34). My idea of an 'Economy of Honour' differs somewhat from Miller's: his 'economy' is a 'zero-sum game' in which honour is traded among the players; I am interested in how treasure and honour circulate together in a 'game' that (as will become clear) is not 'zero-sum'. Hill offers several stimulating readings of passages that involve the giving of gifts, and much of the system described here is implicit in these readings, but he does not define in a precise way what he means by an 'Economy of Honour'.

⁸ Only one word in *Beowulf* could be translated 'coin'. *Sceatt*, used once by itself (1686) and once as an element of a compound (378), can mean either 'coin' or 'treasure', and for each occurrence the context suggests 'treasure'.

tice. Though the warrior elite of these kingdoms consume copious amounts of beer, wine and mead (solid food being fit only for monsters),⁹ the agricultural and commercial sources of these products are of no interest: they seem to be made of nothing, bought from no one. Indeed, the only category of wealth that interests the poet and his characters is treasure—fine weaponry and armour, jewellery, drinking cups and horses with tack. Treasure itself (*māððum*, *sinc*) is a narrower category in the poem than in life. Scholars often note the resemblance between the valuables mentioned in *Beowulf* and those from the Sutton Hoo hoard, but the comparison holds only for gold (excluding coinage), gems and steel: the silver items from Sutton Hoo, Trewhiddle and elsewhere have no counterpart in the poem.¹⁰

The ways that treasure circulates within a nation's economy and the wider world are also radically circumscribed in *Beowulf*. The poet knows enough about commerce to employ it as metaphor—saying, for example, that Hæthcyn bought his revenge against Ongentheow's sons with his life, *heardan cēape* 'a cruel price' (2481)—but his characters neither buy nor sell. Anglo-Saxon kings, of course, acquired wealth by raising revenues of food, service and money,¹¹ by charging tolls and levying fines, but the kings who figure so prominently in *Beowulf* do not appear to tax their subjects. Other modes of exchange are mentioned at least briefly: Hrothgar pays compensation to the Wylfings for the killing of Heatholaf by Beowulf's father (459–72) and to Beowulf for the killing of Hondscioh by Grendel (1053–5), who declines to pay for his own deeds (156–8); compensation cannot be paid for Hæthcyn's accidental killing of his brother Heardred (2441).¹² Famously, a slave's theft of treasure launches the dragon episode (2214–26, 2280–6), but the poem's noble characters do not steal.¹³

⁹ The preference of Old English poetry for drink and the association of eating with monsters in *Beowulf* is thoroughly explored in Magennis, *Anglo-Saxon Appetites*.

¹⁰ Or, for the most part, elsewhere in Old English poetry. See Tyler, 'Poetics and the Past'.

¹¹ See Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, index s.vv. food-rent, taxation.

¹² For a survey of the scholarship concerning this passage and a compelling reading based on Anglo-Saxon law and historical sources, see Jurasinski, *Ancient Privileges*, pp. 113–48.

¹³ Hama's carrying away the *Brosinga mene* (1198–1201) may have been a theft, but the matter is uncertain.

Inheritance is more interesting than compensation or theft: Wealhtheow's concern that kinsmen should inherit the kingdom (1177–87) is the most prominent case, and inheritance of kingdoms, land, swords and armour is mentioned throughout the poem.¹⁴ But gift is by far the most interesting mode of exchange in *Beowulf*, and the poet has much to say about the importance of gift-giving—the benefits that giving confers and the obligations that receiving imposes.

Treasure could enter the Anglo-Saxon economy in a number of ways: when manufactured, when sent by a neighbouring nation as gift, tribute or compensation, when purchased from abroad, when discovered in a grave or unguarded hoard or when seized in battle as loot. These sources of treasure interest the *Beowulf* poet in varying degrees. He does not speak of purchase, and manufacture interests him only when Weland is the manufacturer (455). The dragon's hoard might be called found treasure, but as we shall see, the poem does not present it that way. Payments and gifts of treasure from one nation to another are mentioned incidentally: tribute to the Danes (11), Hrothgar's payment of compensation to the Wylfings (459–72, mentioned above), and friendly exchanges of gifts between the Geats and the Danes (378–9, 1859–63). But treasure enters the economy of *Beowulf* most often as loot: not when acquired by exchange, but rather when seized with violence.

Loot in *Beowulf*

Patricia Silber once observed of *Beowulf* that 'all of the gold spoken of in the poem has at some time been booty'¹⁵—an overstatement, to be sure, but principally so in the sense that we never learn the history of many of the glittering objects that adorn the poem. The histories we do learn often involve looting, and especially the stripping of jewellery and battle-gear (swords, helmets, mail-coats) from corpses: the magnificent necklace that Wealhtheow gives to Beowulf, a sword carried by one of Freawaru's retinue, the thirty *hildegeatwa* 'sets of battle gear' that Beowulf carries from battle

¹⁴ See Klaeber, *Beowulf*, glossary s.v. *lāf*, 1.

¹⁵ Silber, 'Gold and Its Significance', p. 13.

in Frisia, the *frætwe* ‘gear’ seized by Dæghrefn in that same battle, the sword that Wiglaf carries into the dragon fight, and the mail-coat, sword and helmet of Ongentheow all are, at one time or another, loot of this kind.¹⁶ Other kinds of looting are rare. After the slaughter of Finn, his *bām* ‘home’ is comprehensively sacked as Hengest’s men take all of his *ingesteald* (probably ‘treasures from within’), especially *sigla*, *searogimma* ‘jewels and curious gems’ (1157)—and also, as has often been remarked, his queen, Hildeburh. We hear nothing of the raiding of towns and territories, though such pillage is presumably what Higelac was up to when he was slain in Frisia defending his *welrēaf* ‘loot’ (1205), and also the sons of Ongentheow when they repeatedly committed *inwitscear* ‘malicious cutting’ on Geatish territory (2478).

Beowulf’s prize from his first monster fight is Grendel’s arm. After his second monster fight he ignores most of the valuables he sees in the underwater battleground, taking only Grendel’s head and the hilt of the giant sword with which he has killed Grendel’s mother, its blade now melted away in Grendel’s hot blood. These objects bear little resemblance to the loot usually taken in *Beowulf*. The arm and head are utterly without intrinsic value, lacking valuable materials, fine workmanship, and utility. Though adorned with gold (1694), the hilt is a ruin that will never again see battle. Yet these things occupy the position of loot in the narrative: seized from dead foes, they are tokens of victory, and they are negotiables in the Economy of Honour. Beowulf explicitly compares Grendel’s arm to loot, joking that he would have preferred to show Hrothgar the whole body *on frætewum* ‘in its gear’ (962), but Grendel carried no sword and presumably also no defensive gear—so we infer, Beowulf having removed his

¹⁶ More specifically: Beowulf presents Wealhtheow’s necklace to Hygd; it is taken from Higelac’s corpse in his fatal Frisian expedition (1202–14). The sword carried by Freawaru’s young Danish retainer was taken from a Heathobard corpse by someone in his father’s generation (2032–69). The battle gear that Beowulf carries away from Frisia presumably belonged to the thirty men he has killed (2359–62). Dæghrefn cannot bring to his king the gear he has taken in battle because Beowulf has killed him (2503–8). Wiglaf’s sword was taken by his father Weohstan from the body of Eanmund (2611–9). Ongentheow’s mail-coat, sword and helmet were taken from his corpse by Higelac’s retainer Eofor (2977–98).

own mail-coat and helmet in preparation for battle with him (671–4). The kinds of loot favoured in this poem being unavailable, the arm, a weapon of sorts (971, 984–7), serves the same function, and Hrothgar, seeing it, rewards Beowulf with a standard, helmet, mail-coat, sword, and eight horses, one of them outfitted with his own saddle (1020–45). Better as a token of Beowulf's first victory than the arm, Grendel's head is irrefutable proof that the foe is dead.¹⁷ The hilt is a token not only of Beowulf's having killed Grendel's mother, but also of his destruction of the Grendelkin—God's enemies and persecutors of the Danes. Presented with these things, Hrothgar rewards Beowulf with yet more treasure (1866–7).

The near worthlessness of the loot that Beowulf takes in his early battles is notable. The reason for his preference for loot of this kind will become apparent in the course of this chapter, but I will mention here that the pleasure Beowulf takes in Hrothgar's rich gifts and his looting of the slain in Frisia appear to rule out aversion to wealth as a motive. He does, perhaps, make a distinction between objects with and without intrinsic value. Normally a victorious warrior gives the loot he has taken to his lord.¹⁸ Beowulf presents the gold-adorned hilt to Hrothgar—we see the king hold it in his hand (1677–8)—but he only displays Grendel's body parts. A Beowulfian warrior is not indifferent to the intrinsic value of loot, but its greater value lies in its significance.

The dragon's hoard does not lack intrinsic value, though the swords have rusted and the gems have fallen from their settings (2761–4, 3049).¹⁹ Its value is not lost on Beowulf: though he may well have a number of reasons for fighting the dragon, the only ones the poem mentions explicitly are revenge (2336) and seizure of the dragon's treasure (2536).²⁰ After

¹⁷ On the display of body parts of criminals and defeated enemies, see Bremmer, 'Grendel's Arm and the Law', pp. 124–8 and Lockett, 'The Role of Grendel's Arm'.

¹⁸ Dæghrefn would have presented his loot to his king, had he lived (2501–8), Weohstan brings Eanmund's sword to Onela (2611–9), and Eofor brings the loot he has taken from Ongentheow's body to Higelac (2977–98).

¹⁹ For a survey of the treasure mentioned as belonging to the dragon's hoard, see Owen-Crocker, *The Four Funerals in Beowulf*, pp. 64–77. See Chapter Seven, below, for further discussion of the dragon fight and the hoard.

²⁰ For further discussion, see below, pp. 209–21. Greenfield, "'Gifstol" and Goldhoard'

the battle, both Beowulf and his poet think of the treasure as loot: the dying king describes the dragon as *since berēafod* ‘plundered of his treasure’ (2746), and when Wiglaf carries treasure out of the dragon’s lair, the verb that describes what he is doing is *rēafian* ‘to loot’ (2773).

Silber sees treasure that enters the economy as loot as morally tainted.²¹ Most modern readers, indeed, disapprove of looting, and one is tempted to see its prominence in *Beowulf* (like *Waltharius*) as an indictment of the heroic values that inform this poem. But the narrative voice of *Beowulf*, generally so free with opinions about the passing action, has nothing to say about the ethics of looting, which Geats, Danes and their foes all engage in. Further, the poem does not explicitly assign metaphorical or typological meanings to loot. A quick tour of some texts read and written by the Anglo-Saxons that mention loot may help to put the matter in context.

Loot in literature and history

Lētabuntur coram te sicut letantur in messe, sicut exultant uictores quando diuidunt spolia. So sang the Anglo-Saxon monks in one of their canticles.

argues that the poet’s mentioning Beowulf’s sorrow (2327–32) and his intention to take revenge (2336) before his learning of the origin of the conflict and receiving the cup (2403–5) shows that ‘Beowulf’s motive in this case . . . is not less noble or “pure” than it was in his earlier ventures’ (p. 109). But Greenfield has already argued that ‘dragons and buried treasure were in a way inseparable to the Anglo-Saxon mind’ (p. 108); and of course the poet has given great emphasis to the dragon’s hoard—its origin, the dragon’s acquisition of it and the theft that launches the poem’s final episode. If Beowulf was unaware of the association of dragons and treasure, or, in defiance of conventional wisdom, expected this dragon to have no treasure, then presumably the poet would have had something to say about such unusual beliefs. I would also point out Greenfield’s assumption—and that of many commentators—that acquisition of treasure is a less ‘pure’ or ‘noble’ motive than revenge. As this chapter will make clear, I do not agree.

²¹ Silber, ‘Gold and Its Significance’, p. 6: ‘there are two basic uses of gold in the poem: the bad is concerned with plundering, cursing, hoarding or refusal to give, and the good is to adorn people, places and weapons and, above all, to give to deserving warriors’. Later (p. 16): ‘all of the gold and treasure being dealt out has come as spoils of battle, the hoard exists only because men have died, women have been bereaved, many have suffered’. Silber’s position is not unique: see e.g. Crook, ‘Pagan Gold in *Beowulf*’.

A glossator added this translation: *hī blissiað ætforan þē swā swā hī blissiað on gerīpe, swā swā fægnað sigefæste menn þonne hī dælaþ hererēaf* ‘they will rejoice before you as they rejoice at the harvest, as victorious men rejoice when they divide up the loot’.²² The sentiment is an old one (the canticle’s source is Isaiah 9:3), but no less appropriate for Anglo-Saxon England than for the ancient Near East. The loot collected on the battlefield makes concrete the joy of victory: metaphor being commutative, we can say that the joy of sharing out the loot is like the rejoicing of those to whom God has shown favour. Indeed, inasmuch as the Anglo-Saxons commonly attributed victory to God’s favour, the two might easily be conflated. Which was it, martial or religious ecstasy, that brought the faithful streaming to Heavenfield, where St Oswald had set up a cross and prayed before the battle in which he crushed the British king Cadwallon?

A remarkable passage at the end of the poetic *Exodus*, without biblical source, illustrates well the association of victory, looting, joy and God’s favour. The action takes place on the banks of the Red Sea after the drowning of the Egyptian army:

þā wæs ēðfynde Afrisc mēowle
on geofones staðe golde geweorðod.
Handa hōfon halswurðunge,
bliðe wāron, bōte gesāwon,
hēddon hererēafes, hæft wæs onsæled.
Ongunnon sālāfe segnum dælan
on yðlāfe, ealde mādmas,
rēaf and randas. Hēo on riht sceōdon
gold and gōdweb, Iosepes gestrēon,
wera wuldorgesteald. Werigend lāgon
on dēaðstede, drihtfolca mæst. (580–90)

Then one could easily find an African woman,
adorned with gold, on the sea’s shore.
Hands raised up neck-adornments;

²² Korhammer, *Die monastischen Cantica*, p. 279. I quote the revised version in London, British Library, Cotton Vespasian D. xii, with its gloss-like addition of *victores* (Old English *sigefæste menn*).

they were happy, seeing their compensation,
 regarding their loot; their bonds were loosened.
 The sea's survivors on the shore proceeded to distribute
 among the tribal banners the ancient treasures,
 corslets and shields. They justly shared out
 gold and garments, Joseph's property,
 the wondrous wealth of men. Its defenders, greatest of
 noble peoples, lay in the place of death.

Though the treasures mentioned here might at a stretch be identified with those taken by the Jews on their way out of Egypt (Exodus 12:35–6), the position of the passage after the drowning of Pharaoh's army, and the poet's choice of the word *hererēaf* 'loot', signal rather that these treasures have been taken from the Egyptian dead. The poet is careful to justify the looting as reclamation of the wealth accumulated by Joseph, but the property seized by the Jews is not less *hererēaf* for that. *Bōt* (583) is the remedy for their former suffering and compensation for their injuries, both embodied in the loot they are now joyfully gathering. They rejoice before the Lord and divide the loot, both at the same time. This augmentation of their wealth, together with the pleasurable sight of their enemies' corpses strewn *on dēaðstede* 'in the place of death', is the high point on which the poem ends, a most fitting expression of the form that God's favour has taken.

In *Judith*, too, loot expresses the joy of victory as the Bethulians pick the bloody corpses of their hated foes:

Rūm wæs tō nimanne
 londbūendum on ðām lāðestan,
 hyra caldfēondum unlyfigendum
 heolfrig hererēaf, hyrsta scýne,
 bord ond brādswyrd, brūne helmas,
 dýre mādmas. (313–8)

There was opportunity for the land's
 inhabitants to take from those most hated ones,
 their ancient foes, now lifeless,
 bloody loot, bright gear,

shields and broad swords, shining helmets,
valuable treasures.

As if to justify the looting, the poet states that the Bethulians had *dōmlīce* ‘gloriously’ defeated their enemies, and then returns to the pleasurable subject of the treasure itself, which takes an entire month to carry into the city. Then the people bring a reward to Judith, through whose advice the great victory was won:

Hi tō mēde hyre
of ðām sīðfate sylfre brōhton,
eorlas æscrōfe, Hōlofernes
sweord ond swātigne helm, swylce ēac sīde byrnan
gerēnode rēadum golde; ond eal þæt se rinca baldor
swīðmōd since āhte oððe sundoryrfes,
bēaga ond beorhtra māðma, hī þæt þære beorhtan idese
āgēafon gearoþoncolre. (334–41)

The spear-famed nobles
brought to her very self as a reward
from that expedition Holofernes’s
sword and bloody helmet, likewise his broad mail coat
adorned with red gold; and all that the resolute
leader of men owned of treasure or private inheritance,
of rings and bright treasures, they gave that to
the bright, quick-witted woman.

It is worth comparing the Vulgate source of this passage:

Porro autem uniuersa, quae Holofernis pecuniaria fuisse probata sunt, dederunt Iudith in auro, et argento, et uestibus, et gemmis, et omni supellectili, et tradita sunt omnia illi a populo. (Judith 15:14)

But all those things that were proved to be the peculiar goods of Holofernes, they gave to Judith in gold, and silver, and garments and precious stones, and all household stuff, and they all were delivered to her by the people.

The most obvious difference of the poem from its source is that the wealth of Holofernes has been adjusted to resemble the kinds of goods seized as

loot in the passage from *Waltharius* and most of those from *Beowulf* cited above: not only treasure, but also, and especially, his sword, his helmet, still bloody from his decapitation, and his mail-coat. *Peculiaria* ‘peculiar goods’ or ‘private property’, a term that embraces all the things enumerated in the biblical passage, is buried in the Old English list as *sundoryrfes* ‘of private inheritance’, as if the armaments and much of the treasure, which in Anglo-Saxon England might well be rendered to a deceased man’s lord as heriot rather than passed down to an heir,²³ fall outside this category of heritable property. For the Bethulian looters, any distinction between heritable property and that owed to the Assyrian king is of passing interest only: after a battle, a slain man’s belongings go to the victors, not his heirs.

In both the Book of Judith and the Old English poem, the Bethulians bring Holofernes’s property to Judith. That this wealth is brought to her must have made perfect sense to the Anglo-Saxon audience: like *Beowulf* returning from the *mere*, she has brought to the city the head of the hated foe, in its lack of market value or any practical use a pure signifier of her great triumph. And as in *Beowulf*, the signifier is transmuted into wealth—Holofernes’s wealth since the kill was hers—the embodiment of the honour she has won.

In her chaste widowhood, like enough to virginity for Aldhelm to have praised her in his *De virginitate*,²⁴ Judith signifies the Church, as Ælfric says:

Hēo getācnode untwēolice mid weorcum þā hālgan gelaðunge þe gelyfð nū on God, þæt is Cristes cyrce on eallum Cristenum folce, his ān clāne brȳd þe mid cēnum gelēafan þām ealdum dēofle of forcearf þæt hēafod, æfre on clānnysse Criste þēowigende.²⁵

In her works she undoubtedly betokened the holy Church which believes now in God, that is Christ’s Church of the entire Christian people, his one pure bride who with brave faith cut off the head of the old devil, ever serving Christ in cleanness.

²³ See Lapidge, Blair, et al., *Blackwell Encyclopaedia*, s.v. heriot, and the literature cited there.

²⁴ Ehwald, *Aldhelmi opera*, pp. 316–7; Lapidge and Herren, *Aldhelm: The Prose Works*, pp. 126–7; see further below, p. 144.

²⁵ Assmann, *Angelsächsische Homilien und Heiligenleben*, pp. 114–5.

There is a standard typological interpretation of loot that fits neatly into Ælfric's schema. It is based on Luke 11:21–2 (evidently an expansion of Mark 3:27):

Cum fortis armatus custodit atrium suum, in pace sunt ea quae possidet. Si autem fortior illo superueniens uicerit eum, uniuersa arma eius aufert in quibus confidebat, et spolia eius distribuit.

When a strong man armed keepeth his court, those things are in peace which he possesseth. But if a stronger than he come upon him, and overcome him; he will take away all his armour wherein he trusted, and will distribute his spoils.

Spolia uero eius, says Bede commenting on this passage, *ipsi homines sunt ab eo decepti* 'his [Satan's] spoils are those men beguiled by him'.²⁶ Bede employs the same figure of the soul as loot in *HE* ii.20, noting that James, the deacon in York, *magnas antiquo hosti praedas docendo et baptizando eripuit* 'snatched away much loot from the ancient enemy by teaching and baptizing'.²⁷ Ælfric follows Bede's interpretation of the passage from Luke, which leads him to think of the harrowing of hell:

Dēofol is se stranga þe ure Drihten embe spræc, ðe hæfde eall manncynn on his andwealde þā ðurh Adames forgægednysse, ac Godes Sunu cōm, strengra þonne hē, and hine gewylde, and his wēpna him ætbræd and tōbræc his searocræftas, and his hererēaf tōdælde þe hē mid his dēaðe ālȳsde þā ðā hē Adam and Efan and heora ofspring genam, swiðe micelne dæl, of þām mǣnfullum dēofle, and gelædde hī of helle ūp tō heofonan rīce.²⁸

The devil is the strong one whom our Lord spoke of, who at that time had all mankind in his power through Adam's transgression; but God's Son came, stronger than he, and conquered him, and took his weapons from him and overthrew his wiles, and divided his spoils, which he had redeemed with his

²⁶ *In Lucam*, iv.130–1, in Hurst, *Bedae opera exegetica*, iii. 234.

²⁷ Most translators render *praedas* as 'prey', but the Old English version has *micle blōþe þurb his lāre and fullwibte þām ealdan fēonde āfyrde* 'took much loot from the old foe through his teaching and baptizing' (T. Miller, *Old English Version*, i. 150).

²⁸ *Dominica iii in Quadragesima*, ll. 188–96 (Pope, *Homilies of Ælfric*, i. 274–5). The reference to the harrowing of hell was added by Ælfric from some other source.

death, when he took Adam and Eve and a great part of their progeny from the wicked devil and led them from hell up to the kingdom of heaven.

The interpretation of the harrowing of hell as looting (the word ‘harrow’ is a variant of ‘harry’, from Old English *bergian* ‘ravage, plunder’) is older than Ælfric or Bede: we find it, for example, in Arator’s *De actibus apostolorum*:

Quis datur illi

aetherea de parte fragor quantumque resultant
 caelestes in laude chori, cum rector Olympi
 euehit excelsis, quicquid suscepit ab imis,
 ingrediensque polum carnis comitante tropaeo
 exuuias atri raptas de fauce profundī
 lucis in arce locat terrenosque erigit artus! (i.35–41)

What thunder was given for Him from the direction of heaven, and how greatly the celestial choirs resounded in praise when the Ruler of Olympus carried up on high whatever He took upon Himself below, and entering heaven attended by the trophy of His flesh, He placed in the citadel of light the spoils snatched from the jaws of the black abyss and exalted earthly limbs!²⁹

The figure of rescued souls as loot (repeated at ii.120) comes as Christ enters heaven like a Roman general returning from conquest. In our passage from *Judith*, and the one from *Exodus* as well, the loot seized from the enemies of Israel may be understood typologically as Christian souls ‘snatched from the jaws of the black abyss’.

One of the most striking and suggestive treatments of loot in a text known to the Anglo-Saxons is in Prudentius’s *Psychomachia*. Here, after Sobriety has gruesomely slain Luxury, the followers of the fallen Vice flee, scattering behind them robes, garlands, brooches, necklaces, and even such trifles as hairpins and ribbons. The Virtues reject these baubles:

His se Sobrietas et totus Sobrietatis
 abstinet exuuiis miles damnatque castis

²⁹ Orbán, *Aratoris historia*; trans. Schrader, Roberts and Makowski, *Acts of the Apostles*.

scandala proculcat pedibus nec fronte seueros
coniuente oculos praedarum ad gaudia flectit. (450–53)

Sobriety, with her whole army, scorns
These spoils and tramples these cursed stumbling blocks
Beneath her virtuous feet, nor does she gaze
Upon this tempting plunder with delight.³⁰

Avarice and her fellow-Vices, being less fastidious, greedily pick the corpses
of their own comrades and kinsmen:

Si fratris galeam fuluis radiare ceraunis
germanus uidit commilito, non timet ensem
exerere atque caput socio mucrone ferire
de consanguineo rapturus uertice gemmas.
Filius extinctum belli sub sorte cadauer
aspexit si forte patris, fulgentia bullis
cingula et exuuias gaudet rapuisse cruentas.
Cognatam ciuilis agit discordia praedam
nec parcit propriis amor insatiatus habendi
pigneribus spoliataque suos famis inopia natos. (470–79)

Then if a soldier sees his brother's helm
Agleam with tawny gems, he does not fear
To draw his sword and to strike off his head
That he may snatch the jewels from the crown.
And if a son sees lying on the field
His father's body, he strips off as spoils
The bright gold-studded belt and bloody arms:
Thus civil strife deposits its next of kin,
Unsated by greed its dear ones does not spare,
And impious hunger robs its own offspring.

In this way Avarice preys upon her own followers and makes them weak.
So also in Prudentius's interpretation of his biblical model for the battle
for the soul, the battle of the Valley of Siddim (Genesis 14), Abram is able

³⁰ Quotations of *Psychomachia* are from Cunningham, *Prudentii Carmina*; translations
from Eagan, *Poems of Prudentius*.

to rescue his kinsman Lot and defeat the enemy kings because they are *mole praedarum graues* 'heavy with the weight of loot' (*Praefatio* 27; my translation).

In an ironic turn, Avarice is slain by Good Works (*Operatio*), who loots her corpse and distributes the proceeds to the poor (596–603); thus Avarice becomes a victim of the activity that, above all others, symbolized her. Loot has different values for Avarice and Good Works because they desire it for different purposes. For the Vices, wealth is desirable in itself, a greater good even than kinship. For the Virtues, wealth has value only insofar as it enables one to perform charitable works. Looting the slain, as one way in which wealth can be gathered, seems to have no moral valuation attached to it.

Throughout early medieval Europe, looting was as pervasive in real as in literary warfare. Though the counterpart for Anglo-Saxon England of Timothy Reuter's magisterial study of loot and tribute in Carolingian Francia³¹ has yet to be written, there can be no doubt that the Anglo-Saxons were as fond of loot as the Carolingians.³² In the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, loot (*herehȳð*, *hererēaf*) is associated mostly with vikings, but the English take loot when they can. For example, in 473 Hengest and Æsc fought with the Welsh and took *unārīmedlico hererēaf* 'untold loot' (*ASC A*), while in 584 Ceawlin *monige tūnas genom and unārīmedlice hererēaf* 'took many towns and untold loot' (*ASC A*). As late as 1054, the Anglo-Saxons evidently had not lost their taste for loot: in that year Earl Siward invaded Scotland, killed much of the land's nobility, put King Macbeth to flight, and brought back *micel herehūðe swilce nān man ēr ne begeat* 'much loot, such as no man had acquired before' (*ASC D*).

An especially notable instance of looting in a historical source comes in Bede's account of the conquest, in 686, of the Isle of Wight by the

³¹ 'Plunder and Tribute'.

³² Stephen S. Evans has argued, though more on the basis of poetic records than history and chronicle, that loot and tribute were essential economic supports for the military culture of both Celtic and Germanic Britain (*Lords of Battle*, pp. 125–31.). The consequences could be dire when new sources of loot and tribute were no longer turning up, as documented by Timothy Reuter for the Carolingians ('The End of Carolingian Military Expansion', pp. 266–7).

West-Saxon king Ceadwalla, whom Aldhelm describes admiringly as *bello famosus et armis* 'famed for war and arms'.³³ At this time the king, though not yet baptized, was already a promoter of Christianity and a patron of the Church, while Wight was *tota idolatriae dedita* 'entirely given up to idolatry'. Whether motivated by piety or the desire to find land for his own people (Bede does not say), Ceadwalla decided to *stragica caede* . . . *exterminare* 'drive out with cruel slaughter'³⁴ all the natives of the island and replace them with settlers from his own territory. Further, he bound himself by an oath *quia, si cepisset insulam, quartam partem eius simul et praedae Domino daret* 'that if he captured the island he would give to the Lord a fourth part of it and of the loot' (my translation). It is uncertain how much of the island's population Ceadwalla succeeded in driving out or killing. The severity of the campaign, however, is vividly illustrated by Bede's account of two princes of the royal family of Wight who were captured and sentenced to death. A local abbot persuaded the king to allow him to instruct them in the Christian faith and baptize them; then, their souls having been made secure, their execution was carried out as previously ordered. Bede preserved the story of the princes of Wight as a pious *exemplum*, not, apparently, because it was so extraordinary to exterminate (in the modern sense) the ruling family in a conquered *prouincia*. One wonders how often a similar slaughter took place as the small, older kingdoms of the Anglo-Saxons were absorbed into the larger ones.³⁵

³³ *HE* iv.16; Aldhelm, *Carmina ecclesiastica* III, l. 17 (Ehwald, *Aldhelmi opera*, p. 15). The date is from *ASC* A.

³⁴ My translation. *Exterminare* is often translated 'exterminate' (in Colgrave and Mynors, *Bede's Ecclesiastical History*, 'wipe out'), but modern 'exterminate' is not a good translation of *exterminare* 'place outside the boundaries'. The Old English translator understood *exterminare* in this sense, then still in use, and translated it *ūt amēran* (T. Miller, *Old English Version*, ii. 306). Michael Lapidge has pointed out to me that the word *stragica* is not recorded elsewhere, though all manuscripts agree on this reading; he suggests that it may be Bede's slip of the pen, for *tragica* (pointing to *HE* iii.1, *ac tragica caede dilaceraret*). If so, the slip is presumably inspired by Latin *strages* 'overthrow, massacre'. It seems expressive enough, and so I retain it here.

³⁵ For the early kingdoms generally, see Yorke, *Kings and Kingdoms*. For the role of Ceadwalla in the formation of the West Saxon kingdom, see Yorke, *Wessex in the Early Middle Ages*, 52–93.

Bede reports that Ceadwalla gave 300 of Wight's 1200 hides of land to his spiritual mentor, Bishop Wilfrid. Presumably he also fulfilled his vow to give one quarter of his *praeda* 'loot' (*herebyðe* in the Old English version) to the Church. If Bede sees an ethical problem in the Church receiving the loot seized in a programme of what would now be called ethnic cleansing, he remains silent about it. Indeed, the English Church generally celebrated grants of land from monarchs and others without encouraging too much scrutiny of their origins: Stephen of Ripon's *Vita s. Wilfridi* tells us that Ceadwalla gave Wilfrid much land and other gifts, but mentions that king's conquests only tangentially;³⁶ a wall painting from as late as the early sixteenth century in Chichester Cathedral celebrates Ceadwalla's supposed grant of several estates in Sussex to Wilfrid without alluding in any way to the savage warfare that enabled such pious munificence.³⁷ Bede's story of the conquest of Wight illustrates well the uses of loot and other proceeds of war, most of which went to reward Ceadwalla's followers and strengthen their loyalty, guaranteeing future service. But a substantial portion went to the Church in the person of Bishop Wilfrid, who understood these matters since he traveled with a warband himself.³⁸ This gift was no doubt intended to secure God's support for the king's further military adventures.

Ceadwalla's reign was brief, though consequential: in 688 he abdicated, journeyed to Rome, there received baptism, and died a few days later.³⁹ His epitaph, composed at the pope's direction, begins by listing the things he had given up for the love of God:

³⁶ Colgrave, *Life of Bishop Wilfrid*, pp. 84–5.

³⁷ The mural by Lambert Barnard can be viewed online at http://www.wilfrid.com/Wilfrid_pilgrimage/chichester.htm. The charter (S 230) that is the source of Barnard's painting is thought by most to be spurious: see Kelly, *The Electronic Sawyer* (accessed 16 Dec. 2011).

³⁸ Colgrave, *Life of Bishop Wilfrid*, pp. 26–9.

³⁹ The story is told by Bede, *HE* v.7 (for the date, see v.24) and also by Aldhelm, *Carmina Ecclesiastica* III, ll. 17–32 (Ehwald, *Aldhelmi opera*, p. 15; trans. Lapidige and Rosier, *Aldhelm: The Poetic Works*, p. 14). Ceadwalla was among the first of a number of Anglo-Saxon kings who abdicated to join the religious life or go on a pilgrimage (Stancliffe, 'Kings Who Opted Out').

Culmen, opes, subolem, pollentia regna, triumphos,
 Exuuias, proceres, moenia, castra, lares,
 Quaeque patrum uirtus et quae congesserat ipse
 Ceadual armipotens, liquit amore Dei.

High rank and wealth, offspring, and mighty realms,
 Triumphs and spoils, great nobles, cities, halls,
 Won by his forbears' prowess and his own—
 All these great Ceadwal left for love of God.⁴⁰

Exuviae, specifically loot stripped from corpses (Isidore accurately says *exuviae ab exuendo dictae, quia exuuntur* 'exuviae are so called from *exuendo* [stripping], because they are stripped off'),⁴¹ here appears among the perquisites of kingship, no more to be deprecated than power and wealth, fortresses, retainers and heirs. Indeed, neither prelates nor secular rulers of the early Middle Ages seem to have expected victorious warriors to leave loot uncollected on the battlefield. Even the pious British commanded by Bishop Germanus, who routed an army of Saxons and Picts by shouting 'Alleluia' three times, rejoiced to gather the loot (*spolia*) scattered by their foes in panic-stricken flight.⁴²

Gift theory

For a better understanding of the intense pleasure associated with loot, and answers to the questions I raised at the beginning of this chapter, we must follow the treasure as it leaves the battlefield and enters the Economy of Honour, where it circulates as gift. Fortunately, gift-exchange in *Beowulf* has been intensively studied by several critics and is now reasonably well understood.

Modern studies of gift-exchange in *Beowulf* owe a great debt to modern anthropology. So does the present study. Yet it cannot be stated often

⁴⁰ *HE* v.7 (corrected from R. Sharpe, 'King Ceadwalla's Roman Epitaph', i. 176; trans. Sherley-Price, *Ecclesiastical History*, p. 275, with an adjustment of the spelling of Ceadwalla's name).

⁴¹ Lindsay, *Etymologiarum libri xx*, p. XVIII.ii.8.

⁴² *HE* i.20. Sedulius Scottus, repeating this story in *De rectoribus christianis* xv (Dyson, *Sedulius De rectoribus*, pp. 148–53), retains Bede's emphasis on the taking of loot.

enough that anthropological theory must be used with caution when one's aim is to understand a poem rather than a society inhabited by flesh-and-blood people. An anthropologist who was able to travel in time to conduct a first-hand study of gift-exchange in an Anglo-Saxon village would seek to understand the phenomenon in a number of contexts—for example, kinship structures, systems of land-tenure, commodity exchange, and religious ritual; every aspect of a culture interacts in complex ways with other aspects. But, as I discussed at the beginning of this chapter, the phenomenon I call the Economy of Honour is really a narrow slice of an economic system, presented in *Beowulf* as if it were the whole. Further, it is an aspect of a society imagined as ancient, distant, and pagan. *Beowulf* is suffused with awareness of these differences from the poet's own time and place, so we should not assume that the Economy of Honour as the poet represents it matches precisely a phenomenon in his own culture.

We bring the tools of anthropology to the world of *Beowulf* much as we might to the Troy of Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*. To use such tools to deepen our understanding of either ancient Troy or medieval London would rather obviously be a serious mistake. But a poet representing an imagined world will, if possible, present it as plausible, possessing an internal coherence comparable to that of our mundane reality—though inevitably simplified and perhaps idealized. It will be a world where people behave as we expect them to given the circumstances in which the poet places them—one that is meant to be apprehended by applying the same understanding with which we try to make sense of the world we actually live in. Thus I think it is valid and fair to bring anthropological theory (a tool for making sense of our world) to bear on *Beowulf*, as long as our methods do not lead us to confuse the world of the poem with the real one.

One of the foundational texts of modern anthropology is Marcel Mauss's *Essai sur le don* (1923–24).⁴³ Observing that in archaic societies (and modern ones as well), gifts are 'obligatorily reciprocated', Mauss asks,

⁴³ Cited here in the translation by W. D. Halls (Mauss, *The Gift*). Citations of the French text are from the website 'Les classiques des sciences sociales' at the Université du Québec, http://classiques.uqac.ca/classiques/mauss_marcel/socio_et_anthropo/2_essai_sur_le_don/essai_sur_le_don.html.

‘what power resides in the object’ to make that so.⁴⁴ His claim, which has held up well over eighty-five years,⁴⁵ is that in a gift economy, as opposed to a mercantile economy, objects are not ‘alienable’—the giver of a gift is never truly severed from it. ‘What imposes obligation in the present received and exchanged, is the fact that the thing received is not inactive. Even when it has been abandoned by the giver, it still possesses something of him. Through it the giver has a hold over the beneficiary.’⁴⁶ This ‘hold’ is released only when the beneficiary returns a gift of equal or greater value. The gift, meanwhile, in being passed from hand to hand, may acquire its own ‘name, a personality, a history, and even a tale’.⁴⁷ Always, the honour (*honneur*) of both giver and recipient are at stake in an exchange, for one acquires honour by giving, and one loses honour by receiving—at least until the gift is reciprocated.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* p. 3. ‘Quelle est la règle de droit et d’intérêt qui, dans les sociétés de type arriéré ou archaïque, fait que le présent reçu est obligatoirement rendu? Quelle force y a-t-il dans la chose qu’on donne qui fait que le donataire la rend?’ (emphasis in Mauss’s text).

⁴⁵ Subsequent scholarship has more often elaborated than contested his basic findings. Studies I have found most valuable include Gregory, *Gifts and Commodities*; Strathern, *Gender of the Gift*; Graeber, *Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value*, pp. 23–47 and 151–228 and (though not primarily concerned with gift exchange) Graeber, *Debt: The First 5,000 Years*. Anglo-Saxonists looking for a survey would do well to read the chapter on ‘Gift and Exchange’ in Surber-Meyer, *Gift and Exchange* or, for a more extended treatment, the early chapters in Bazelmans, *By Weapons Made Worthy*. Historians have studied gift exchange intensively. A classic study is Grierson, ‘Commerce in the Dark Ages: A Critique of the Evidence’; for an excellent recent survey with many references see Curta, ‘Merovingian and Carolingian Gift Giving’. For theoretical commentary see Geary, ‘Gift Exchange and Social Science Modeling: The Limitations of a Construct’ and Rosenwein, ‘Francia and Polynesia: Rethinking Anthropological Approaches’. A useful collection of recent essays is Davies and Fouracre, *The Languages of Gift in the Early Middle Ages*. In recent years archaeologists have also begun to pay attention to gift theory: see e.g. Lund, ‘At the Water’s Edge’, pp. 50–1; Fern, ‘Horses in Mind’, pp. 144–7 and Scull, ‘Social Transactions’. Finally, it is worth noting that gift-exchange remains important in the later Middle Ages: see, for example, Harper, ‘Pearl in the Context of Fourteenth-Century Gift Economies’.

⁴⁶ Mauss, *The Gift*, pp. 11–12. ‘Ce qui, dans le cadeau reçu, échangé, oblige, c’est que la chose reçue n’est pas inerte. Même abandonnée par le donateur, elle est encore quelque chose de lui. Par elle, il a prise sur le bénéficiaire.’

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* p. 24. ‘chacun a un nom, une personnalité, une histoire, même un roman’.

The killing of the Swedish king Ongentheow by Eofor, Higelac's thegn, illustrates how simply Mauss's theory of gift-exchange can be applied to *Beowulf*. After Eofor slays the old king, he loots the body, taking mail-coat, sword and helmet. He presents these tokens of his deed to Higelac (2977–88), who reciprocates with even greater gifts—land, rings and his own daughter as a *hāmweorðunge* 'honour to the home' (2993–8). For Higelac to fail to reciprocate with greater gifts would have brought dishonour on him.⁴⁸ Because the king's return gift is greater, Eofor is under an obligation which, as poets are fond of reminding us, must be repaid by continued military service.⁴⁹ Such service is variously useful—in national defence, for example—but as regards the Economy of Honour, it must be understood as labour applied to the acquisition, by means of killing and looting, of yet more treasure for presentation to the king.⁵⁰

Heremod, the poem's model of a bad king (901–15, 1709–22), shows us how failure to make return gifts can lead to ruin. He resembles Prudentius's Vices in that he desires wealth for its own sake, and greed weakens him as it does them. In failing to give gifts, he both loses honour and also lessens his war-making ability (*his hild sweðrode* 'warfare subsided' 901), for a warrior to whom no return is made for his gift of loot has little reason to fight again for so miserly a lord. Heremod's greed must have been comprehensible to royal members of *Beowulf*'s audience, who had to struggle to fund their

⁴⁸ Gregory, *Gifts and Commodities*, p. 55 quotes a study of Highland Burma by E. R. Leach: 'although an individual of high-class status is defined as one who receives gifts (e.g. "thigh-eating chief") he is all the time under a social compulsion to give away more than he receives. Otherwise he would be reckoned mean and a mean man runs the danger of losing status.' In Old English poetry, of course, a king is defined as one who gives gifts, not one who receives them; yet both giving and receiving are essential to persons of high status in either culture.

⁴⁹ On the warrior's obligation to repay gifts with service, see *Beowulf* 20–5, and also 2864–72; see also *The Battle of Finnesburh* 39–40 and *The Battle of Maldon* 194–7. The Welsh *Y Gododdin* acknowledges the obligation that comes with acceptance of a gift (metonymically mead), but takes a negative view of it (Clancy, *Medieval Welsh Poems*, pp. 45–66).

⁵⁰ That military force can also be directed towards such useful ends as defending the realm is not completely ignored in *Beowulf*: see ll. 1769–73.

warlike activities.⁵¹ The expenses of a real-world king attempting to engage in Beowulfian gift-giving practices must always have exceeded his income, unless he resorted to such unheroic measures as taxation, but the ring-givers of Old English poetry, where normal accounting practices do not apply, seem able to give more than they receive with little effort.

Heremod's violence is connected with his lack of generosity in more than a general way. Giving can be aggressive, as everyone knows who has abided more than a few birthdays in the world. The potlatch ceremonies studied by Mauss are extravagant competitions among rival chieftains who win honour by giving away or destroying property. Andrew Cowell, studying continental historical and literary texts of the central Middle Ages, writes of gift-giving as a kind of violence and makes a good case that, for example, William of Normandy's extravagant gifts to Harold Godwineson, described in the *Gesta Guillelmi* of William of Poitiers, are intended to force Harold to submit to his will.⁵² In *Beowulf*, the gift is a means of forcing a man to do what he might not do voluntarily. A thegn's gift of loot compels the king to part with some of his wealth; the king's gift compels the thegn to risk his life in battle or lose honour, as Wiglaf claims that Beowulf's ten chosen warriors do when they run away from the dragon (2864–74, 2884–91). A leader who does not bend men to his will through gifts can do so only through force: that is why Heremod, unwilling to give gifts, *brēat bolgenmōd bēodgenēatas, eaxlgesteallan* 'angrily slew his table-companions and shoulder-comrades' (1713–14).

Despite the element of compulsion, the *Beowulf* poet portrays gifts as good and desirable and, quite generally, received with undisguised pleasure.⁵³ Somehow, in defiance of the expectations raised by our Maussian

⁵¹ In a passage added to his translation of Boethius, King Alfred reflects on those things that a king has to supply to support the three classes of person necessary for effective rule (it seems he is thinking primarily of the warrior class): *land to būgianne and gifa and wēpnū ond mete ond ealu ond clāpas* 'land to cultivate, gifts, weapons, food, ale and clothing' (Godden and Irvine, *The Old English Boethius*, C text, Prose 9, 16–17). An army was clearly expensive to maintain.

⁵² *Medieval Warrior Aristocracy*, pp. 19–29.

⁵³ For example, see Beowulf's reaction to Hrothgar's gifts at 1025–6 and 1785 and the Geatish company's eager survey of them at 1884–5; also the poet's praise of Beowulf's

analysis, receiving a gift can actually enhance one's honour, as Beowulf's gift to the coastguard does:

Hē þæm bātwearde bunden golde
 swurd gesealde þæt hē syððan wæs
 on meodubence mǣpme þy weorþra
 yrfelāfe. (1900–3)

He gave a sword bound with gold
 to the boat-guard so that he afterwards was
 worthier on the mead-bench because of that treasure
 and heirloom.

In a classic article published above fifty years ago, Ernst Leisi outlined how honour might be conveyed with a gift. According to Leisi, the possession of fine things is an infallible sign of a Beowulfian warrior's worthiness (Manneswert)—so much so that 'it is impossible in Old English to say of someone, "he is rich, but a bad and unhappy man", for virtue or happiness or both are already included in the concept "rich".'⁵⁴ For the Old English poet, the intrinsic value of a sword or fine piece of jewellery is less important than its function as a reward, or advance payment, for the performance of worthy deeds. Such rewards and payments, Leisi insists, are not to be understood in a narrowly economic sense, and the bond they create between lord and retainer is not merely contractual: the bond is moral and emotional, and the rewards and payments confer honour along with wealth. The lord who confers honour by gifts of treasure, and elicits vows of loyalty and bravery, is at the centre of the ethical, economic and political system that Leisi calls the *Ehrensold-Ordnung*⁵⁵—an early glimpse of our Economy of Honour.

gifts to Higelac at 2166–70.

⁵⁴ 'Gold und Manneswert', p. 260: 'Es ist unmöglich, auf Altenglisch von jemandem zu sagen: "Er ist reich, aber ein schlechter und unglücklicher Mensch", weil in Begriffe "reich" Tugend oder Glück oder beides schon eingeschlossen ist.'

⁵⁵ 'Fassen wir jetzt die einzelnen Aspekte zusammen, so ergibt sich das folgende ethisch-ökonomisch-politische System, das wir Ehrensold-Ordnung nennen wollen' (*ibid.* pp. 266–7).

Among those studies that have taken an anthropological approach to *Beowulf*,⁵⁶ Michael Cherniss's *Ingeld and Christ* (pp. 79–101) is particularly relevant to our project. Developing Leisi's argument in several interesting directions, Cherniss argues that the relationship between the individual warrior and his treasure is the same as that between groups and their 'collective wealth': the treasure deposited by the Last Survivor (2233–70) thus represents the 'collective honour of the tribe' (p. 97). Cherniss defines 'treasure' broadly, in terms of its function (as I do here): Grendel's arm counts as 'a kind of treasure', as do Grendel's head and the hilt that Beowulf brings back from the *mere* (p. 84).

Perhaps Cherniss's most important contribution, for the purposes of the present study, is to connect the honour associated with treasure to the violent act that introduces it into an economy:

[I]n the heroic system of values, the plundering of enemies slain in battle is an integral part of worthy conduct. The treasure which a warrior gains by plundering is the concrete representation of the honor which he has won in battle and is, indeed, the only tangible proof of the honor and esteem to which his deeds entitle him. When a warrior is slain in battle, the honor which he has won by his former deeds passes with his war-implements to his slayer, who holds both the treasure and the veneration until he, in turn, is vanquished (pp. 92–3).

A warrior's worthy deed—killing an enemy in combat—confers honour upon his weapon as the weapon confers honour on the warrior in a perfectly reciprocal relationship (pp. 94–7). A corollary of this point is that a warrior's wealth is no more alienable when it is stripped from his corpse than when he gives it away. Whatever part of him would have gone with the gift goes also with the loot. This 'something' of the owner adds value beyond what is in an item's materials, workmanship or usefulness. The ability of treasure to store up some aspects of those who have owned it explains the extraordinary value placed on such objects as the swords of

⁵⁶ See especially Berger and Leicester, 'Social Structure as Doom'; Surber-Meyer, *Gift and Exchange* and Hill, *Cultural World*. I will discuss the work of Berger and Leicester and Hill as appropriate; Surber-Meyer is a useful guide both to the anthropological scholarship and to the many mentions of wealth and gift-giving in Old English poetry.

Ongentheow and Eanmund (*Beowulf* 2611–19, 2985–98) and how these items acquire narratives, as Mauss observed in other cultures: the narratives record the deeds and honour associated with them (pp. 96–7).

I would add to Cherniss's observations that the loot collected on the battlefield must be valued not as one would a commercial product, by setting a price on it, but rather as a gift. What makes one gift greater or less than another is not its intrinsic value, but rather what C. A. Gregory calls 'rank' or 'exchange-order': 'Objects as gifts have this exchange-order rather than exchange-value, because the relationship between them is ordinal rather than cardinal.'⁵⁷ A major difference between gifts and money (or things one buys with money) is that one cannot add up a number of low-ranking gifts to equal one high-ranking gift as one can add up pennies to make a dollar: the rank of a multi-part gift is no higher than that of its highest-ranking part. We can perhaps catch a glimpse of Beowulfian ranking in passages that mention the bestowal of multiple gifts: the highest-ranking one seems to be reserved for the rhetorically emphatic position at the end of the list:

- Hrothgar to Beowulf: standard; helmet; mail coat; sword (1020–4)
- Hrothgar to Beowulf: eight horses; Hrothgar's saddle (1035–42)
- Wealhtheow to Beowulf: rings and garment; fine necklace (1193–1201)
- Higelac to Beowulf: sword; 7,000 in land with hall and lordly throne (2190–9)
- Higelac to Eofor: 100,000 in land and rings; Higelac's daughter (2995–8)

Garments, jewellery and battle gear seem to rank below land, but the sword is the greatest of gifts of battle gear.⁵⁸ Anthropologists have called a woman the 'supreme gift',⁵⁹ and here a king's daughter—an appropriate return for

⁵⁷ Gregory, *Gifts and Commodities*, p. 48.

⁵⁸ The high status of the sword is clear from the number of poetic words available and the care that poets take in describing it (Davidson, *The Sword in Anglo-Saxon England*, pp. 121–58). Van Meter, 'Ritualized Presentation of Weapons', p. 176 cites the scarcity of swords relative to other weapons in Anglo-Saxon burials as evidence of their status.

⁵⁹ Gregory, *Gifts and Commodities*, pp. 21, 63 ascribes the phrase to both F. E. Williams (writing in 1936) and C. Lévi-Strauss (writing in 1949).

the gift of a king's battle-gear—ranks above gifts of land and jewellery. These lists also confirm David C. Van Meter's observation that gifts with a royal connection are ranked above otherwise equivalent objects.⁶⁰

As with gifts, so with the dead and the treasures taken from them: rank matters more than intrinsic value, and one cannot measure a warrior's accomplishments by simply adding up his kills or the monetary value of the loot he has taken. His honour cannot exceed that of the greatest warrior he has slain.

An implication of Cherniss's valuable study that he touches on but does not explore fully is that a man and his wealth are in some ways equivalent.⁶¹ In particular, Cherniss's interpretation of the treasure that accompanies Scyld on his last voyage and that which is burned with Beowulf's corpse is that, 'since the virtues of these warriors have died with them (except, of course, in the minds of the living), the outward symbols of these virtues must also "die" and be buried' (p. 85). Similarly, the Last Survivor's treasure 'dies' with the death of the last member of the group that owned it, and must be buried (p. 97).

The idea hinted at by Cherniss is developed more fully by Jos Bazelmans in *By Weapons Made Worthy*, a study of exchange in *Beowulf* based on the work of Mauss and later anthropologists. Bazelmans's concern is to map the relationships among the members, both living and dead, of the Beowulfian community, showing how children are constituted as complete adults through rituals of exchange, and dead kings as ancestors whose qualities are remembered. Though the whole argument of Bazelmans's book deserves careful study, I am interested primarily in his ideas about the 'something' of the giver (to recall Mauss's formulation) that is conveyed with a gift. This constituent of the self, according to Bazelmans, is what anthropologists call 'image'—the external view of the subject in its various aspects. For this concept he uses the Old English word *weorð* (corresponding to what I have been calling 'honour'), which neatly packages ideas of

⁶⁰ 'Ritualized Presentation of Weapons', p. 176.

⁶¹ Michael J. Enright comes independently, and from quite a different direction, to a similar conclusion in 'Warband Context', pp. 315–24, writing of "a magical link between warriors and their swords" (p. 316) and supporting the point with compelling parallels from Icelandic and Irish literature.

wealth, beauty and perceived virtue. Whenever one who is *weorðlic* ‘honourable’ gives a gift, *weorð* is conveyed as well and becomes a constituent of the recipient’s person. An object (a gift) and a subject (a giver or recipient) can both have *weorð*, and the object’s rank-value, measured as an amount of *weorð*, is the same as that of the subject; thus Bazelmans says that object and subject are ‘commensurable’.

Loot in the Economy of Honour

Applying the findings of these scholars, we can take an overview of the workings of the Economy of Honour. Because a warrior and his treasure are commensurable, sharing the property of honour, when that warrior meets a violent end, his killer carries off his honour with his belongings. Because giving a gift always increases one’s honour, the killer’s honour is further augmented when he presents the loot to his king. Having received this gift of loot—that is, of wealth and honour—the king ‘banks’ it on behalf of the nation in the *bord* ‘treasury’, which thus stores up both the wealth and the honour of the nation. To defend this *bord* is as vital a royal function as to defend territory and people, as the *Brunanburh* poet says of Æthelstan and his brother Eadmund: *land ealgodon, bord and hāmas* ‘they defended the land—its treasury and homes’. From the *bord* the king makes his return gift, and in doing so he transmutes the honour that the warrior has won with his own hand, by killing and taking, into that which is conferred by the good opinion of others. This is *dōm* or *mērdō*, the reputation for having done great deeds in battle, and it is what every warrior values above all else.

We can carry this analysis a step further. It is not only wealth and honour that get transmitted with a gift of loot, but the deed itself—the ‘credit’ for the killing. In receiving Ongentheow’s gear from Eofor, Higelac becomes *bonan Ongenþēoes* ‘Ongentheow’s killer’ (1968), even though Eofor delivered the killing stroke and continues to be remembered as performer of the deed. As the king embodies the nation, the nation assumes collective responsibility for the deed along with the king. One can say with equal accuracy that Eofor, or Higelac, or the Geats killed Ongentheow, for Eofor’s violent deed has been traded upwards to the top of the social hierarchy

and diffused down again with the king's gifts, until any of Higelac's Geatish warriors can say, '*we* are the killers.'

From the perspective of the bereaved and vengeful enemy, it does not matter much who wielded the sword, once a killing has been nationalized in this way. A case in point comes in the context of Beowulf's prediction of the way in which a planned marriage between Hrothgar's daughter Freawaru and Ingeld of the Heathobards is likely to fail. Beowulf imagines a scene in which an old Heathobard, having spotted a Danish member of Freawaru's retinue carrying a sword long ago stripped from a comrade's corpse, incites the comrade's son to kill the Dane (and, presumably, recover the sword). The old Heathobard contemptuously calls this Dane *þāra ban-ena byre nāthwylces* 'the son of one or another of those killers' (2053): so he is not the killer, and not necessarily the son of the killer, but just someone in the next generation along who happens to possess the sword now. How did he get it? After being seized as loot, the sword would have been given to the Danish king, who might have given it back to the killer as part of his return gift, kept it in the *hord* for later presentation to someone else, or, as seemingly attested by the recently discovered Staffordshire Hoard, broken it into pieces to be melted down or re-used.⁶² The Heathobards do not know how often the sword has changed hands since it entered the Danish economy or whether the present owner received it by gift or inheritance, and they seem not to care much. In their eyes he *morðres gylpeð* 'is boasting of that murder' (2055) in wearing and displaying it, and this 'boast' makes him *ealdres scyldig* 'answerable with his life' (2061).⁶³ Yet revenge, and recovery of the dead man's honour, could be accomplished by killing any Dane at all. They are all equally answerable.

⁶² The Staffordshire Hoard may be taken as a reminder that one of the standard epithets for an Anglo-Saxon lord is *sinces brytta* 'breaker of treasure'; *brytta* also comes to mean 'lord'. In Norse skaldic poetry too, allusions to a king's breaking of treasure are frequent.

⁶³ The relevant definition in BT, s.v. *scyldig*, is II. 'responsible for, liable for, chargeable with an ill result, (1) with gen'. The first of the quotations illustrates a sense in which the *scyldig* one is liable to forfeit a thing in the genitive case; and this is a common idiom, e.g. *Gif ceorl būton wifes wīsdōme dēoflum gelde, hē sīe ealra his æhtan scyldig* 'If a commoner offers to devils without his wife's knowledge, let him be liable to forfeit all his possessions' (Laws of Wihtried, 12, Liebermann, *Gesetze der Angelsachsen*, i. 13).

The operation of the Economy of Honour can be observed just as well in *Waltharius* as in *Beowulf*. Indeed, the narrative arc of the Latin poem is much like that of the first two-thirds of the Old English one: a young warrior comes of age, winning honour by killing foes. The treasure he acquires in the course of the action is interesting mainly as the material manifestation of the honour he has won. Walthari, like some of the heroes of Icelandic saga, is a freelance freebooter: he has declared his independence of Attila, and he has yet to return to his native realm of Aquitaine, where he will presumably have to answer to his father, King Alphere. In the meantime, the honour he wins is entirely his own. Peter Dronke states that Walthari and Hiltgunt help themselves to some of the Hunnish treasury because 'they see [it] as the tribute their own parents had been compelled to pay the conqueror'.⁶⁴ This surmise, if true (the poem does not make their motives explicit), would mean that they are commendably aware of the political context of their actions, but there is reason to doubt that they are out to recover the tribute. Payment of tribute is a pre-emptive offering of loot, a stipulation that, were a battle to be fought, one would lose. Like loot, tribute conveys both value and honour: paying it is much like losing a battle, only without the inconvenience of being killed. Walthari could recover by stealth the monetary value of the treasure that his father paid to the Huns, but he can recover his father's lost honour only by public and widely approved acts, and theft is not among these.⁶⁵ But stealing wealth that one has already won honourably might be acceptable. This, I suspect, is why the poet emphasizes the magnitude of the victories Walthari has won on Attila's behalf and pointedly mentions the loot his army gathers at the last of these.⁶⁶ The wealth he makes off with is in a sense his own, since by his own prowess he has contributed far more than Attila himself to the size of the Hunnish treasury. While the Attila of this poem is not the monster we meet in, say, the Old Icelandic *Atlakviða*, he is far from an

⁶⁴ 'Waltharius-Gaiferos', p. 30.

⁶⁵ Though Gunthari comes in for a good bit of criticism in the course of the poem (he is proud and stubborn), his determination to recover tribute by fighting for it is far more likely to win him honour than stealing it would have been.

⁶⁶ The Hunnish army *super occisos ruit et spoliauerat omnes* 'rushes upon the slain and loots them all' (207).

ideal king: he is slack, and his relationship with Walthari is exploitative. He deserves the humiliation and dishonour that the narrative inflicts upon him far more than he does the gold in his treasury.

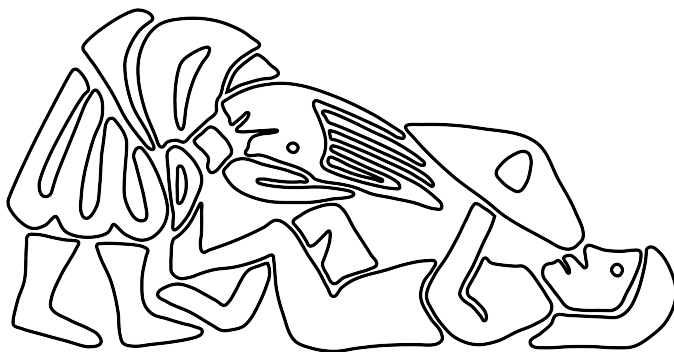


Figure 1: Drawing after the Egil panel of the Franks Casket (British Museum). The prone figures appear to have been stripped of their gear (except, curiously, their shields). The figure bending over this naked corpse seems to be in mourning.

At the beginning of this chapter I asked why Walthari does not take the tunics of the men he has killed and why the fact is worth mentioning. A modern reader will perhaps assume that he leaves the corpses clothed out of respect, and indeed Walthari does show respect for his dead foes, placing their heads with their bodies and praying for their souls (1157–67). But there may be another explanation as well. Undergarments were valuable,⁶⁷ and not all medieval victors were willing to leave them behind: the looted corpses depicted in the margins of the last panels of the Bayeux Tapestry are entirely naked, and that is also the condition of the corpses in the Egil panel of the Franks Casket (see figs. 1, 2, 3). However, such garments do not belong to the standard battle-kit mentioned as loot in the poems we

⁶⁷ The modern reader, accustomed to plentiful and inexpensive clothing made of synthetic fabrics and sewn by underpaid labourers in third-world countries, may not suspect how expensive clothing could be in earlier ages. For Anglo-Saxon England, one indication is that persons of rank routinely bequeathed rather ordinary garments in their wills: the will of Wynflæd, for example, mentions two *tunecan* ‘tunics’ (Whitelock, *Anglo-Saxon Wills*, p. 14).

have looked at, which includes only swords, helmets, mail-coats, horses and jewellery. It appears that nothing else could convey honour to the taker. The Economy of Honour excludes all transfers of wealth in which honour is not transferred as well: this is why, as we saw at the beginning of this chapter, *Beowulf* shows no interest in commerce and the collection of rents and taxes. Indeed, it is true in heroic poetry, as in *Psychomachia* and the later texts that Andrew Cowell studies,⁶⁸ that to desire wealth for its intrinsic value is deeply dishonourable. By mentioning that Walthari leaves his foes' tunics and other items, the poet points out that he is not only respectful of his fallen foes, but also not subject to the vice of greed: he desires only honour.

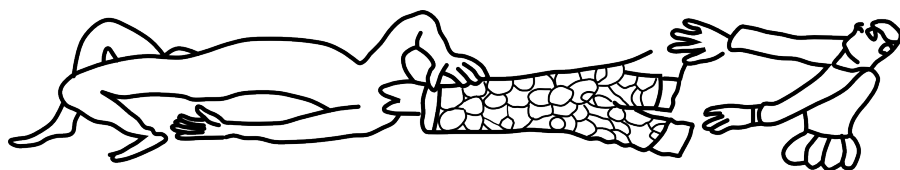


Figure 2: Drawing after the Bayeux Tapestry. Corpses left on the battlefield at Hastings have been stripped to the skin: this man's penis is partly visible.

In *Beowulf* one can easily see how the hero's acquisition of treasure marks the growth of his honour. After each of his Danish monster fights Beowulf presents his worthless loot to Hrothgar, as we have seen, and receives rich gifts in return. With each round of gift-giving his honour increases. These gifts do not only measure Beowulf's honour, however; they also help to define his relationship with Hrothgar, which his victory over the Grendelkin has utterly transformed.⁶⁹ On Beowulf's arrival in Denmark, Hrothgar saw him as the son of a man whom he had once

⁶⁸ See especially his comments on 'William the Conqueror's accusation of greed against Harold' in William of Poitiers's *Gesta Guillelmi* (*Medieval Warrior Aristocracy*, pp. 43–6).

⁶⁹ Berger and Leicester, 'Social Structure as Doom', pp. 47–9 track in detail the progress of negotiations between Hrothgar and Beowulf and do a good job of stating what is at stake. My own reading emphasizes Hrothgar's loss of honour less than Berger and Leicester do: he has much to spare.

helped, the heir to an old obligation (457–72). When Hrothgar planned to offer his young visitor treasure (384–5), he surely had in mind gifts of the sort that a lord typically gives to a thegn. But the service Beowulf actually performs—he restores to the king the chief symbol of his earthly power—cannot be so easily rewarded.

The worthlessness of Beowulf's loot is like Walthari's leaving the tunics in that it tells us he is not greedy. But more than that, its worthlessness signals the impossibility of calculating the magnitude of an appropriate return gift. In representing the service that he has performed, Beowulf's gift is symbolically nothing less than the kingdom of Denmark—and what return gift could top that? John M. Hill has argued that Hrothgar implicitly offers Beowulf a place in the Danish royal succession: such, he suggests, are the implications of Hrothgar's 'adoption' of Beowulf (946–8), the gifts he gives and various indicators in the characters' speeches.⁷⁰ Hill's analysis is perceptive and subtle, but in the end I am left with doubts that Hrothgar's words and actions add up to an offer of the succession. Hrothgar declares that he will *frēogan* 'love' Beowulf as a son (948), and later Beowulf reminds him that he was *on fæder stæle* 'in the place of a father' (1479). In both places the rhetoric seems to suggest a relationship like that of father and son in its emotional content rather than actual adoption with all its implications for inheritance and succession. Hill has noted the 'kingly' quality of some of Hrothgar's gifts:⁷¹ a golden standard such as goes before a king in battle; a mail coat (perhaps other battle gear as well) that, we later learn, belonged to King Heorogar; and Hrothgar's own saddle (1020–4, 1037–42, 2156–9). These items are consistent with Hrothgar's view, later expressed, that the Geats would do well to choose Beowulf as their king, should they find themselves in need of one (1845–53). That view arises from the nature and magnitude of Beowulf's services and gifts. However, one gift that Hrothgar surely would have given had he considered Beowulf a member of the Danish royal house, or even a Danish thegn, is absent here. The king gives him no land, but only portable gifts: things he can carry with him when, as everyone expects, he goes home.

⁷⁰ 'Beowulf and the Danish Succession'; *Cultural World*, pp. 87–100.

⁷¹ *Cultural World*, pp. 98–9.

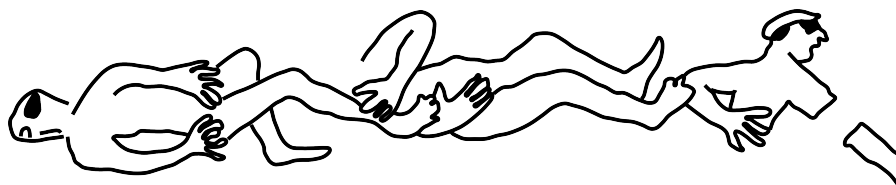


Figure 3: Drawing after the Bayeux Tapestry. More naked corpses are left on the battlefield.

As Beowulf's gifts to Hrothgar consist merely of a couple of lumps of flesh and a bit of gold, it would be easy for the king, in reciprocating, to match their intrinsic value; but honour resides in the symbolic more than in the intrinsic value of a gift, and the symbolic value of these objects is precisely equal to everything Hrothgar owns. As a king's return gift, like Higelac's to Eofor, must be greater than a warrior's gift of loot,⁷² Beowulf's gifts to Hrothgar *cannot* be reciprocated. If the old king were instantly to abdicate, handing all of Denmark over to Beowulf, even that would be insufficient, merely matching and not exceeding what he has received.⁷³ For this reason, Hrothgar's gifts, though no truthful person can find fault with them (1046–9), impose no obligation on Beowulf. I suspect that Hrothgar, who asks nothing of the hero beyond love and alliance, understands this very well.

Wealhtheow is another matter entirely. Someone has told her (*mē man sægde* 1175) that Hrothgar would *habban* 'have' (1176) Beowulf as a son,⁷⁴ a formulation vague enough to embrace both what Hrothgar means—he will love Beowulf as if he were a son—and what she fears—he will adopt

⁷² See also Higelac's gift to Beowulf (2190–9). We are not told that Onela gave Weohstan more than the gear he had stripped from Eanmund's body (2616–8), but it would be unthinkable to give no more to a warrior who had slain a rival claimant for the Swedish throne.

⁷³ Interestingly, in the film adaptation of *Beowulf* directed by Robert Zemeckis (2007, screenplay by Neil Gaiman and Robert Avary), Hrothgar does abdicate, handing his kingdom over to Beowulf—and then commits suicide. What he passes on in this retelling is not so much a kingdom as a curse.

⁷⁴ Klaeber points out in his note to 1176 that Wealhtheow was present when Hrothgar 'adopted' Beowulf, having been depicted entering the hall with him a few lines before (923–4). This narrative detail seems to have been forgotten in the meantime.

Beowulf, introducing a threat to her sons' inheritance. This dramatic situation has been largely understood for many years.⁷⁵ But Wealhtheow's role in the narrative, I suspect, is a greater one, namely to dramatize the difficulty of defining Beowulf's new relationship with the Danes. She can read for herself in the fraught language of seating in the hall—Beowulf is positioned next to her own sons (1188–91)—that he has far exceeded the status of a thegn. Yet receiving him as a member of the Danish royal house would risk dangerously destabilizing the delicately balanced politics of the realm. Neither thegn nor prince, Beowulf has escaped all the available categories.

Wealhtheow attempts to bring the unruliness of Beowulf's status under control by giving him gifts. That she can, at least in principle, do so is unquestionable. In the Economy of Honour, a queen is much like a king. She receives gifts of treasure from warriors, 'banks' wealth and honour on the nation's behalf, and gives gifts from her *bord*, conferring honour and imposing obligation.⁷⁶ Wealhtheow's gifts include two arm-rings, a garment⁷⁷ and a necklace, comparable in its magnificence to the *Brōsinga mene* 'necklace of the Brosingas' (1199), an object famous to the audience of *Beowulf*, if not to us. These, like Hrothgar's gifts, are royal, being explicitly identified as *þēodgestrēona* 'national treasures' (1218). The obligation she would like to impose on Beowulf, both with the gifts she gives now and with her promises of future rewards, is to support her sons. She does not ask him to serve them as a thegn: both her gifts and her language reveal her understanding that she cannot hope to fix Beowulf's status as what Hill calls 'a much honoured retainer among retainers'⁷⁸ even if she might like to do so. When she asks him to be *lāra līðe* 'kindly in precepts' and *dædum gedēfe* 'gentle in deeds' to her sons (1220, 1227), her words do not

⁷⁵ See e.g. Schücking, *Heldenstoltz und Würde*, pp. 40–3, who sees Wealhtheow as reacting (with great queenly and womanly delicacy) to Hrothgar's 'adoption' of Beowulf.

⁷⁶ For a quick summary, see Klein, *Ruling Women*, p. 98. For examples in a Frankish context, see Curta, 'Merovingian and Carolingian Gift Giving', pp. 685–6. For a more extensive discussion of the role of queens in the heroic economy, see Chapters Four and Five.

⁷⁷ The garment is called simply a *brægl* in the text (1195, 1217). The word can refer to a mail coat (cf. 454), but only, I surmise from the quotations in BT, when the context is quite explicit, as in compounds like *beadohrægl*.

⁷⁸ *Cultural World*, p. 103

evoke kinship⁷⁹ so much as seniority and rank: she is imagining Beowulf as one who is in a position to advise and instruct her sons if he wishes, and whose choice it is to treat them either gently or harshly.

The status that Wealhtheow imputes to Beowulf is reflected also in his parting words to Hrothgar, a speech largely taken up with magnanimous promises of aid, should Hrothgar find himself oppressed by his neighbours:

Gif ic þæt gefricge ofer flōða begang
 þæt þec ymb sittend egesan þȳwað
 swā þec hetende hwīlum dydon,
 ic ðē þūsenda þegna bringe
 hælepa tō helpe. Ic on Higelāc wāt
 Gēata dryhten, þēah ðē he geong sȳ
 folces hyrde, þæt hē mec fremman wile
 wordum ond worcum þæt ic þē wel herige
 ond þē to gēoce gārholt bere
 mægenes fultum þær ðē bið manna þearf. (1826–35)

If I should hear, over the expanse of the sea,
 that neighbours are oppressing you with terror
 as enemies formerly did to you,
 I will bring a thousand thegns
 and warriors to your aid. I know of Higelac,
 lord of the Geats, guardian of the people,
 even though he is young, that he will support me
 with words and deeds so that I can honour you well
 and bring to your aid a forest of spears,
 the help of [my] strength, wherever you are in need of men.

Beowulf speaks here for himself. Though confident of Higelac's support, he does not bind his king or his nation to any course of action. The thousand thegns he will bring to Hrothgar's aid are his own. Here, and in his promise to welcome the Danish prince Hrethric to the Geatish court—a

⁷⁹ *Ibid.* p. 102.

delayed response to Wealhtheow's pleas⁸⁰—Beowulf positions himself as patron and protector of the Danish royal house. With respect to the Danes, Beowulf has achieved what Andrew Cowell calls 'integrity'⁸¹—he has no obligations to anyone in Hrothgar's court, and from now on, whatever he does for them he will do at his own pleasure. Beowulf's statement that Hrothgar gave him gifts *on mīnne sylfes dōm* 'according to my own judgement' (2147), whatever its precise meaning in its context,⁸² surely expresses this independence and integrity.

Beowulf may owe nothing to the Danes, but he is still Higelac's thegn, and his actions on his return to the Geats are exactly what we would see had he slain a pair of Higelac's enemies. He presents to his own beloved king much or all of the treasure he has won in Denmark—the return for his gifts to Hrothgar of Grendel's body parts and the hilt—and in doing so donates both wealth and honour to the Geatish nation. In return Higelac gives him vastly greater wealth: not only Hrethel's sword, but an extensive realm of his own with *bold ond bregostōl* 'hall and lordly throne' (2190–6). Higelac's status remains higher than that of Beowulf, who continues to repay his king's gifts with military service (2490–3).⁸³

Beowulf's gift of Wealhtheow's necklace to Higelac's queen Hygd is to be understood in the same way as his gifts of treasure to Higelac. We are not told whether she makes a return gift, but we are surely to assume that she does so. She is a good queen, not *tō gnēað gifa Gēata lēodum* 'too

⁸⁰ A. Orchard, *Critical Companion*, pp. 219–22 argues that Wealhtheow's speeches to Beowulf go unanswered. However, it is possible to read 1836–8 as a promise of help to one of her sons, and metonymically, I suspect, both of them. The delay in the response is polite, as it is correct to allow time to elapse before making a return gift. I would suggest, however, that Beowulf's offer of support is not compelled by Wealhtheow's gift.

⁸¹ *Medieval Warrior Aristocracy*, pp. 20–5.

⁸² See Biggs, 'Politics of Succession', pp. 728–30 for discussion and doubts.

⁸³ The reading offered here is not incompatible with the interesting view, offered by Biggs, 'Politics of Succession', that Higelac makes Beowulf his co-ruler on his return to the Geats. However, I find it difficult to reconcile lines 2166–71 with the tensions that Biggs finds within the Geatish polity. Indeed, the contrast between the political stability of the Geatish and the instability of the Danish royal house seems likely to be deliberate.

stingy with gifts to the people of the Geats' (1930). In her generosity she follows the advice of *Maxims I* 82–7 that a king and queen should both *geofum gōd wesan* 'be good with gifts', and the queen in particular should *rūmheort bēon mēarum ond māþmum* 'be liberal with horses and treasures'.

Exchange and seizure

Although I have approached the subject of loot via theories of exchange, I must emphasize that looting is not a form of exchange, but rather violent seizure. A victor seizes the vanquished warrior's life, fortune and honour all together and gives nothing in return. In the contest of battle as imagined in *Beowulf*, *Waltharius* and other poems, warriors risk their finest possessions—weapons, armour and jewellery—in a way that seems to the modern reader sheer madness. What present-day soldier would wear his dress uniform, service medals, and great-grandfather's World War I revolver into combat? But in the context of the Economy of Honour it makes perfect sense. A warrior's finery announces to friend and foe alike the honour that he has won in battle and that his lord has bestowed upon him by his gifts. Seeing it, friends know how much faith they may place in his prowess; foes know how much to fear him. But further, there seems to be an unspoken agreement among all combatants that they will stake their valuables, their honour and their lives in the game of skill and chance that is warfare (see Introduction, p. 14). This is a winner-take-all game: the victor comes away laden with treasure, his honour exalted, while the defeated foe lies dishonoured and very likely naked on the battlefield, his corpse picked over by the wolf, the raven and the eagle, whose constant presence warns that even the comfort of the funeral rite may be denied to him.⁸⁴

On the battlefield warriors engage in socially sanctioned violence; elsewhere, the analogues of killing and looting are *mansliht* 'homicide' and *rēaflāc* 'robbery'.⁸⁵ Law and custom attempt to mitigate the socially disrupt-

⁸⁴ For a compelling discussion of unburied corpses and their meanings in *Beowulf* and other Anglo-Saxon texts, see Owen-Crocker, 'Horror in *Beowulf*'.

⁸⁵ In Icelandic sources, where the situation differs somewhat in the absence of a powerful state, robbery is *rán*. William Ian Miller comments: '*Rán*, like gift exchange, admitted reciprocity and defined social relations. But it inverted the movement of property as

ive effects of these crimes by converting them from seizures to exchanges. Famously, a killer in the Germanic world may pay *wergild* to the victim's family, exchanging money or goods for what he has taken (though the recompense is always inadequate—see above, p. 20). Failing that, the victim's survivors may take revenge, forcing the exchange of one life for another.⁸⁶ In the laws of Ine, the logic of compensation for *rēaflāc* is similar: the criminal must restore (*āgife*) what he has taken (or presumably, in appropriate cases, an equivalent) and pay a penalty of sixty shillings. In either case, the ledger must be balanced at the end of the transaction, which involves not only life and wealth, but also honour: the honour of a dead man is restored by payment of *wergild*, and the robbery victim's honour is restored along with his goods.

But the warrior on the battlefield has no interest in exchange or balanced ledgers: his aim is to be one of the winners in the Economy of Honour. In the Icelandic saga, the type of character that best illustrates the disruptive effect of this warrior ethic away from the battlefield, on the farm, is the *ójafnaðarmaðr*, the man who refuses either to pay compensation for his own acts or to accept compensation from others, who insists on taking more than his due, and who bristles with hostility, signalling to all that he is not to be trifled with.⁸⁷ He may be a seriously dangerous man like Skammkel in *Njáls Saga*, whose devious manipulation of his weak-minded friend Otkel draws the hero Gunnar, up to that point notable for his restraint, into the first conflict that he is unable to resolve peacefully.⁸⁸ Or he may be a violent yet clownish character like Víga-Hrapp 'Killer-Hrapp'

against the duty to make return. It was now the prior possessor who owed a response, not the raider; and it was the raider who achieved social dominance from the transfer, not the prior possessor' ('Gift, Sale, Payment, Raid', p. 24).

⁸⁶ Stefan Jurasinski has argued persuasively that revenge is not glorified in Old English law and literature to nearly the extent that critics have often imagined (*Ancient Privileges*, pp. 90–110); on feuding from a historian's perspective see Hudson, 'Feud, Vengeance and Violence'.

⁸⁷ W. I. Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, p. 67, *Eye for an Eye*, ch. 1.

⁸⁸ Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, *Brennu-Njáls Saga*, pp. 120–46. Skammkel is described as *illgjarn ok lyginn, ódell ok illr viðreignar* 'malicious and untruthful, overbearing and vicious to deal with' (*ibid.* p. 120; Cook, *Njal's Saga*, p. 79). For an excellent analysis of this sequence, see W. I. Miller, 'Gift, Sale, Payment, Raid', pp. 25–35.

in *Laxdæla Saga*, whose orneriness persists even beyond his death, until Ólaf Pái has his body burnt and so ends his hauntings.⁸⁹ Glám of *Grettis Saga* has several characteristics of the type: disliked by everyone, he describes himself as *skapstyggur* 'irritable' when he does not get his way; his selfish and impious insistence on satisfying his appetite when others are fasting brings about his death. Like Hrapp he becomes a *draugr*, a corporeal ghost capable of killing as well as terrorizing.⁹⁰ Glám is of course one of the closest analogues of Grendel,⁹¹ and this *ellorgæst* 'alien spirit', who kills without paying compensation, is the most prominent *ójafnaðarmaðr* in *Beowulf*:

sibbe ne wolde
wið manna hwone mægenes Deniga,
feorhbealo feorran, fēa þingian;
ne þær nænig witenā wēnan þorfte
beorhtre bōte tō banan folmum. (154–8)

he did not desire friendship
with any man of the Danish host,

⁸⁹ Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, *Laxdæla Saga*, pp. 19–20, 39–40, 66–6. The saga writer says of Hrapp that *fyrir þat er hann var ódæll . . . en vildi ekki bæta þat er hann misgerði, þá flýði hann vestan* 'because he was difficult to deal with . . . and would not pay compensation for crimes he had committed, he had fled from the west (i.e. from the Hebrides)' (*ibid.* p. 19). Another Víga-Hrapp in the same saga is even more clownish: a braggart and obvious coward, he appears near the end of Ch. 63 and is killed near the beginning of Ch. 64 (*ibid.* pp. 190–1). Yet a third Víga-Hrapp, in *Njáls Saga*, is also pseudo-comic: he helps himself to others' food, dallies with a benefactor's daughter, robs and burns a temple, and is finally killed by Grím and Helgi Njálsson (Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, *Brennu-Njáls Saga*, pp. 209–20, 225–9, 234).

⁹⁰ Guðni Jónsson, *Grettis Saga*, pp. 107–23; trans. Johnston and Faulkes, *Three Icelandic Outlaw Sagas*, pp. 142–54.

⁹¹ The resemblance of the Glám episode of *Grettis Saga* and *Beowulf* was first noted by Guðbrandur Vigfússon, *Sturlunga Saga*, p. xlix, who described it as 'a late version of the famous Beowulf Legend'. He continues, 'Gretti's fight with Glam, and afterwards with the troll-wife and the monster below the water-fall, is thus the Icelandic version of the Gothic hero's struggle with Grendel and his witch-mother.' Fjalldal, *Long Arm of Coincidence*, denies any connection between *Beowulf* and *Grettis Saga*, but of course there are many possible positions between Guðbrandur Vigfússon's and that of Fjalldal, e.g. the nuanced reading of A. Orchard, *Pride and Prodigies*, pp. 140–68.

to cease the life-taking, settle with wealth;
nor had any of the counsellors reason to expect
bright compensation from the killer's hands.

As the violence of the *ójafnaðarmaðr* is inappropriate in the Icelandic countryside, so Grendel's attacks are inappropriate in the royal hall. It is shocking enough that he kills so outrageously and eats his prey (metaphorically *hūðe* 'loot', 124); the setting in which he does so makes his deeds even worse, for they violate the peace and amity of the hall—a serious offence under the laws of Æthelberht, and sometimes capital under Ine and Alfred.⁹²

The good warrior of *Beowulf* does not fight in the king's hall or attack his fellow countrymen, but when confronting foes on the battlefield the attitudes of the *ójafnaðarmaðr* are appropriate and praiseworthy. Further, custom does not demand that the warrior who has won treasure and honour by killing foes 'settle with wealth', surrendering what he has won. In the view of the victorious warrior, his possession of treasure and the honour that goes with it is fully justified: he has proved the superiority of his claim to these things by killing the man who possessed them before. After Higelac's death in Frisia, we are told, Beowulf carries thirty sets of battle-gear down to the sea (2361). It is a great feat of strength, to be sure, as is swimming home over the North Sea with such a burden, if that is what the text describes.⁹³ But in marvelling at such feats we should not lose sight of the more significant point that in the battle that claimed the life of his king, Beowulf has killed thirty men, carrying off their honour with their gear. In the world of this poem, a warrior wins honour by killing foes, not by lifting weights. And like the Danes humiliated by Grendel's numerically similar depredations,⁹⁴ the Franks and Frisians have no reason to expect compensation from Beowulf's hand. Nor have they any reasonable

⁹² Laws of Æthelberht 2, 3, 5; Laws of Ine 6; Laws of Alfred 7 (Liebermann, *Gesetze der Angelsachsen*, i. 3, 52–5, 90–1).

⁹³ For an overview of the controversy concerning this passage, see Fulk, Bjork, and Niles, *Klaeber's Beowulf*, notes to ll. 2361 and 2367. Most critics believe that Beowulf swam from Frisia to Geatland with thirty sets of battle gear on his arm, but some maintain that he went home by boat.

⁹⁴ The Grendeline aspects of Beowulf's performance in this battle have been noted, es-

prospect of exacting revenge, since he is protected by his own formidable power, by the great distance between Frisia and Geatland, and by the collective responsibility of the Geats for the killing that they have done in battle.

My concern in this chapter has been to show how violence and the looting of the slain are essential to the system of exchange as observed by *Beowulf* critics. The killing of a foe introduces both wealth and honour into the heroic economy, and as these goods circulate, the violent act circulates with them. Wealth, honour and violence are fungibles in the Economy of Honour. To illustrate this idea, I have chosen straightforward examples from *Beowulf* and *Waltharius*—tales of victory in which a hero's acquisition of wealth and honour is easy to understand. Not all the heroic tales of *Beowulf* are straightforward, though, and not all are of victory.

pecially by A. Orchard, *Pride and Prodigies*, p. 32: thirty is the number of men killed by Grendel in his first visit to Heorot, and Beowulf kills one foe, Dæghrefn, with his bare hands (2506–8). One notes with relief that Beowulf does not (so far as we know) eat Dæghrefn after he has crushed the life out of him.

CHAPTER THREE

Unferth's Gift

C RITICS WHO DISCUSS Unferth, Hrothgar's *þyle*, usually give most of their attention to the flyting, or verbal combat, in which he brings up an embarrassing episode from Beowulf's youth to support his prediction that the Geat will get the worst of his encounter with Grendel. This flyting is the most spectacular and substantial of Unferth's appearances, occupying as it does 108 lines shortly after Beowulf's arrival in Denmark (499–606). But Unferth returns to the narrative four more times: after the first monster fight he boasts less of his own warlike deeds (980–90); after the performance of the song of Finnesburh we catch a glimpse of him sitting at Hrothgar's feet and hear that the Danes trust his spirit and bravery (1165–8); before the fight with Grendel's mother he lends Beowulf his sword (1455–71, 1488–91); and finally Beowulf returns the sword to him, magnanimously praising it despite its uselessness in the fight (1807–12). Unferth is the poem's most prominent Dane after Hrothgar himself, more prominent even than Wealhtheow. His story is woven into the narrative of Beowulf's Danish adventure.

In this chapter I will apply the ideas presented in Chapter Two to a problem in the interpretation of Unferth: having attacked Beowulf's wisdom and prowess in virulent terms, and having been accused, by way of retort, of cowardice, empty bragging and fratricide, why does he so far swallow his pride as to lend Beowulf his magnificent sword, surely his most prized possession? Other, related problems include how this sword comes to fail, what that failure may mean to Unferth, and how best to read Beowulf's gracious speeches on accepting and returning the sword.

An impressive amount of scholarly ingenuity has been brought to bear on the flyting episode: important issues include, first, whether Unferth, as *þyle*, holds an official position in Hrothgar's court; second, whether he speaks for himself, for Hrothgar or for the Danish warriors gathered in Heorot; and, third, whether we are to understand him as having what Fred C. Robinson has called 'a most unheroic, Falstaffian attitude toward heroic deeds' or, on the contrary, as being what Geoffrey Hughes has called 'a warrior of some importance, most probably a champion'.¹ The first of these issues has been illuminated by Ida Masters Hollowell and Michael J. Enright, who have found characters occupying positions much like Unferth's in Old Norse and Old Irish texts:² if by 'official' we mean that a character has been chosen by a king to perform a particular function, then Unferth's position in the hall is probably an official one. But Unferth's having such a position does not necessarily mean, as Enright suggests, that his attack on Beowulf lacks rancour since he speaks not so much for himself as for Hrothgar and the Danes.³ To call the *þyle* a 'spokesman' makes him sound to the modern ear like a press secretary, giving voice to someone else's thoughts and suppressing his own. But surely Unferth's duties are different. The material gathered by Enright suggests that the job of the *þyle* is as much to speak his mind to the king as to speak for him; why shouldn't he speak his mind to the Geatish visitor as well? The poem tells us that Unferth does just that, giving voice to his own envy:

Wæs him Bēowulfes sīð,
mōðges merefaran micel æþþunca,
forþon þe hē ne ūþe þæt ænig oðer man
æfre mæraða þon mā middangeardes
gehēdde under heofenum þonne hē sylfa. (501–5)

¹ Robinson, 'Elements of the Marvellous', p. 129; Hughes, 'Beowulf, Unferth and Hrunting: An Interpretation', p. 394.

² See Hollowell, 'Unferð the *þyle*' for the Norse material and Enright, 'Warband Context', pp. 299–310 for the Irish. The question raised by Hollowell and Enright of Unferth's possible pagan connections has no bearing on the argument in this chapter, and so I do not address it.

³ 'Warband Context', p. 310. Enright is not the first to have suggested this: see especially Clover, 'The Germanic Context of the Unferþ Episode', pp. 140–1, 146–7.

Beowulf's expedition,
 the brave man's sea-journey, made him envious,
 because he did not admit that any other man
 anywhere in the world ever cared more about honour
 under the heavens than he did himself.

In this matter I find myself favouring the wise and level-headed reading of Edward B. Irving, who sees Unferth as speaking for himself, and in doing so echoing (unofficially) the feelings of those Danes who have failed to confront Grendel's evil.⁴ Their comrades—those who made the other choice and vowed over their ale cups to wait for Grendel in the hall—have all perished, their blood staining the benches (480–8). The memory of those dead champions is a reproach to every Danish warrior who has chosen life over honour—that is, all of those now living. *Of course* Beowulf's presence is an *æffunca* 'cause of envy' to them, for in proposing to do what none of them has been willing to do he becomes as much a reproach as the dead whose ranks he dares to risk joining. He cares more about honour than any of them because he cares more about it than he does about life.

The third issue that critics have addressed, how seriously to take Unferth as a warrior, is far from settled, though the preponderance of opinion favours taking him pretty seriously. The reading I am going to offer does not require that we take a position (though I hope to shed a little light on the question). We need only believe that Unferth cares at least a little about honour—if he didn't, why would he bother to attack Beowulf? He must care enough about honour to be willing to risk something dear to him to acquire it—not his life, to be sure, but his very fine sword, Hrunting.

Gifts and loans

Unferth's presentation of his sword to Beowulf is generally regarded as a loan. The verbs that describe the act—*lēon* and *onlēon*—while not well attested in Old English, generally mean 'lend', and Beowulf does in fact return the sword, as one returns a loan. However, it is a puzzle that when Beowulf returns the sword he refers to it as a *lēan* (1809), which elsewhere

⁴ *Rereading Beowulf*, pp. 36–47.

means 'reward', 'return gift', 'wage'. The most common solution to the difficulty is to understand *lēan* at this place as meaning 'loan'—though, because that sense is not attested elsewhere, it is widely regarded as no more than the best of a number of bad alternatives.⁵ In what follows I will argue that a loan can also be a *lēan*: both belong to the broader category of the gift.

To the modern mind, gifts and loans could hardly be more different. Giving a gift, according to the usual way of thinking, is an act of pure, disinterested generosity. The recipient, moved solely by gratitude and love, gets to decide what return gift, if any, is appropriate. A loan, on the other hand, is a legalistic construction that comes with the requirement that a return be made and a stipulation of exactly what the return must be: the item itself (the lawn mower you borrowed from your neighbour) or an equivalent, perhaps with interest (the thirty-year mortgage on your house). But as I have argued above (pp. 54–7), backed by anthropological theory, a gift is never 'free'. Marcel Mauss recognized the kinship of gift and loan, often using such words as 'credit', 'interest' and 'debt' in writing of gifts and the obligation to reciprocate.⁶ In the gift economy as he described it, the precise nature of the return gift, the amount of 'interest' due, the time that may or must pass before a return is made, and the penalty for default, are commonly governed by custom. Even in modern cultures, the customs

⁵ For a summary of the scholarship on this occurrence of *lēanes*, see Fulk, Bjork, and Niles, *Klaeber's Beowulf*, note to ll. 1807–12.

⁶ He found the resemblance strong enough that he suggested that the loan (as also barter and sale) was originally an outgrowth of the gift (*The Gift*, p. 36). Later, writing of the Kwakiutl: 'normally, the potlatch must be reciprocated with interest, as must indeed every gift. The rate of interest generally ranges from 30–100 per cent a year. Even if a subject receives a blanket from his chief for some service he has rendered, he will give two in return on the occasion of a marriage in the chief's family, or the enthronement of the chief's son, etc. . . . The punishment for failure to reciprocate is slavery for debt' (*ibid.* p. 42) ('normalement le potlatch doit toujours être rendu de façon usuraire et même tout don doit être rendu de façon usuraire. Les taux sont en général de 30 à 100 pour 100 par an. Même si pour un service rendu un sujet reçoit une couverture de son chef, il lui en rendra deux à l'occasion du mariage de la famille du chef, de l'intronisation du fils du chef, etc. . . . La sanction de l'obligation de rendre est l'esclavage pour dette').

can be surprisingly rigid: think of the quite difficult calculations surrounding the selection of holiday gifts, or the rules governing the 'repayment' of dinner invitations.

If the essential similarity of gifts and loans is difficult for us to perceive, that is because it is in the nature of the gift to obscure the similarity. In introducing his concept of 'symbolic capital', Pierre Bourdieu insists that to be explicit about the giver's expectations and the recipient's obligations is to turn the gift into something else:

The theoretical construction which retrospectively projects the counter-gift into the project of the gift has the effect of transforming into mechanical sequences of obligatory acts the at once risky and necessary improvisation of the everyday strategies which owe their infinite complexity to the fact that the giver's undeclared calculation must reckon with the receiver's undeclared calculation, and hence satisfy his expectations without appearing to know what they are. In the same operation, it removes the conditions making possible the *institutionally organized and guaranteed misrecognition* which is the basis of gift exchange and, perhaps, of all the symbolic labour intended to transmute, by the sincere fiction of a disinterested exchange, the inevitable, and inevitably interested relations imposed by kinship, neighbourhood, or work, into elective relations of reciprocity: in the work of reproducing established relations—through feasts, ceremonies, exchanges of gifts, visits or courtesies, and, above all, marriages—which is no less vital to the existence of the group than the reproduction of the economic bases of its existence, the labour required to conceal the function of the exchanges is as important an element as the labour needed to carry out the function.⁷

In Bourdieu's view, giver and recipient conspire to conceal the real nature of their transaction, pretending that the gift is spontaneous, voluntary and disinterested—neither responding to a prior gift nor looking for a return. A lapse of time between gift and return is an essential element of the disguise. To agree at the moment of giving on what the return must be is to make a 'rational contract' (p. 171), and such a contract, however formal or informal it may be, makes all the difference between a gift and a loan.

⁷ *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, p. 171.

Bourdieu draws a bright line between gifts and other forms of exchange, but when we look at the Old English material the distinction seems not so straightforward. As is well known, the *Beowulf* poet is very clear about what one is entitled to expect as a return for a gift (see especially 20–4, 2491–3, 2606–10, 2864–72), but what Bourdieu's formulation does not predict is the way in which Hrothgar and Wealhtheow repeatedly make (or attempt to make) contracts, placing orders for heroic deeds and favours. Before the Grendel fight, Hrothgar binds himself to pay for Beowulf's victory, if he survives:

Ne bið þē wilna gād
gif þū þæt ellenweorc aldre gedigest. (660–1)

There will be no lack of things you desire
if you survive that work of valour with your life.

Even more explicitly, he promises treasure in exchange for Beowulf's fighting Grendel's mother—if he survives. Hrothgar only partly disguises the commission by phrasing it as a dare:

Eard gīt ne const
frēcne stōwe ðær þū findan miht
sinnigne secg: sēc gif þū dyrre!
Ic þē þā fæhðe fēo lēanige
ealdgestrēonum gyf þū on weg cymest. (1377–82)

You don't know the land,
the fearful place where you can find
the sinful warrior: seek it if you dare!
I will reward you for that dispute with property,
with ancient acquisitions, if you come away from there.

When Wealhtheow asks Beowulf to be *lāra līðe* 'kindly in precepts' to her sons (see above, pp. 68–70), she adds, *ic þē þæs lēan geman* 'I will remember to reward you for that' (1220). She also attempts to specify in advance the return she expects from Hrothulf for all the gifts and honours that she and the king have lavished upon him. Speaking to Hrothgar in Hrothulf's presence, she says:

Ic mīnne can
 glædne Hrōþulf, þæt hē þā geogoðe wile
 ārum healdan gyf þū ār þonne hē,
 wine Scildinga, worold oflātest;
 wēne ic þæt hē mid gōde gyldan wille
 uncran eaferan gif hē þæt eal gemon,
 hwæt wit tō willan ond tō worðmyndum
 umborwesendum ār ārna gefremedon. (1180–7)

I know my
 gracious Hrothulf, that he will maintain
 those youths with honour if you, lord of the Scyldingas,
 depart the world before he does;
 I expect that he will repay our
 children with good if he remembers all
 the honours that the two of us formerly performed
 as delights and distinctions for him as a child.

The first three of these transactions have characteristics of the purchase (payment is offered for a service), of the loan (a contract is made, or at least offered, and the 'purchase' is 'on credit') and of the gift (the 'price' and time of payment are in the discretion of the giver). The fourth has characteristics of the loan, as *Wealhtheow* asserts the existence of a debt and tells Hrothulf what kind of payment she expects him to make.

That it is possible to look at some transactions as both gifts and loans finds support in other Old English texts, where certain words, according to dictionaries, editors and translators, seem able to stand for either concept. The entry for *lænan* in the Bosworth-Toller *Supplement*, for example, offers two definitions: 'to lend' and 'to grant', and for *onlēon* 'to grant the loan of something' and 'to grant, bestow'. It is worth taking a closer look at these and related words. In the Exeter Book poem *The Gifts of Men*, we read that God *sumum hēr ofer eorþan æhta onlihð woruldgestrēona*, which we may translate (adopting the definition assigned by Toller to this instance of *onlēon*) 'to some here upon the earth grants possessions and worldly acquisitions'. The clause echoes a formula that is common in Old English homilies, for example, the homily for the first Sunday in Lent from Ælfric's second series of Catholic Homilies: *And uton dōn þearfum and*

wannspēdigum sume biððe ure gōda, þām ælmihtigum Gode tō wurðmynte þe bit us ālēnde, þæt hē us mære on ðām tōweardan forgife ‘And let us provide for the poor and those of little means some benefit from our goods, to the honour of the almighty God who lent it to us, so that he may give us more in the future’.⁸ Ælfric’s variation of *ālēnan* and *forgifan* seems significant: in this world, God merely lends worldly goods, but to those who have used their wealth well he will later give the gift of salvation, which requires no return. In a passage drawn from an anonymous homily on alms-giving, Ælfric explains further how God limits our ownership of worldly things:

Gif þū talast tō ðīnum geswince þæt þæt ðū hæfst, oððe gif ðū wēnst þæt ðære eorðan wæstmas ðīne sind, ðonne cweð se ælmihtiga wealdend tō ðē: ‘Efne nū ic ðē oftēo mīnne fultum, and hafa ðē þīn geswinc. Ic oftēo mīne rēnscuras, and ic wyrce ðīn land unwæstmbære. Gif þæt land ðīn is, se rēn is mīn: tēoh ðū forð rēnscuras gif ðū miht, and gewætera ðīne æceras. Gif ðū māge, dō þæt sunne scīne, þæt ðīne æceras rīpion.’ Witodlice þæt sylfe land þe ðū ðē geāgnast nis ðīn, ac is ðæs ælmihtigan, swā swā se wītega cwæð: ‘Sēo eorðe and hire gefyllednys is Godes.’⁹

If you attribute what you have to your labour, or if you believe that the earth’s fruits are yours, then the almighty Ruler will say to you: ‘Even now I am withdrawing my help from you; and keep your labour for yourself. I will withdraw my rain showers, and I will make your land unfruitful. If the land is yours, the rain is mine: bring forth rain showers if you can, and water your fields. If you can, make the sun shine so that your fields may ripen.’ Indeed, the very land that you claim for yourself is not yours, but is the almighty’s, as the prophet said: ‘The earth and its plenty is God’s.’

God retains title to all things, and to consider oneself the true owner of one’s land and other goods is to invite divine retribution. Ælfric’s theology is unequivocal, and yet he varies verbs for ‘give’ and ‘lend’ freely. In this

⁸ *Dominica .i. in Quadragesima* (Godden, *Catholic Homilies II*, vii.43–5).

⁹ *Ibid.* vii.72–82. The source is a pseudo-Augustine sermon on alms-giving (Godden, *Ælfric’s Catholic Homilies: Introduction*, notes to 67–79 and 80–5). The same material was used in Vercelli Homily X (Scragg, *Vercelli Homilies*, ll. 164–76). Ælfric’s homily is one of the better attested of his works, being preserved (whole or in part) in ten manuscripts. The Vercelli homily was also popular, being preserved in nine manuscripts.

homily, for example, he writes *Dæl of ðām ðe ðē God forgeaf* 'give from that which God gave you' (63–4) and *God forgifð rīcum welan genihtsumlice* 'God gives wealth abundantly to the rich' (67); in others *Bēo se rīca gemyndig þæt hē sceal ðæra gōda þe him God ālānde āgyldan gescēad, hū hē ðā ātuge* 'Let the rich man be mindful that he must give an accounting of how he used the goods that God lent to him',¹⁰ and *þā ðincg þe him God lānde on ðysum life tō brūcenne* 'the things that God lent him to use in this life'.¹¹ For God's bestowal of worldly goods, either verb will do.

We find the same variation between words for 'give' and 'lend' in Old English diplomas, where a common formula refers to God's bestowal of earthly goods. The ninth-century reeve Abba begins his will speaking of *mīn lond þe ic hæbbe, ond mē God lāh, ond ic æt mīnum blāfordum begæt* 'my land, which I have, and God lent to me, and I received from my lords'.¹² Yet the remainder of the will shows clearly that Abba does own the land in a legal sense, for he is able to exercise one of the principal rights of ownership, namely to dispose of property by will. His relationship to his land looks different depending on whether he is considering it in the context of his earthly existence or of eternity. The ninth-century nun Lufu prefers the verb *forgifan* in her grant to Christ Church: *ðēm ærfe ðe mē God forgef* 'the inheritance that God gave me'. Likewise King Alfred's will has *mīn yrfe þæt mē God and mīne ylðran forgēafon* 'my inheritance, which God and my ancestors gave me'.¹³ Both Lufu and Alfred seem to understand God's grant of property in the same way they understand an inheritance; yet if questioned on the theological point they would surely agree with Abba.

The anonymous author of Vercelli Homily X dramatizes the idea implicit in these documents, that God can intervene in the passing on of goods

¹⁰ *De Dominica Oratione* (Clemoes and Godden, *Catholic Homilies I*, xix.231–2).

¹¹ Memory of the Saints (Skeat, *Ælfric's Lives of Saints*, xvi.328).

¹² Harmer, *Select English Historical Documents*, no. 3. Harmer translates *lāh* as 'gave' (p. 40). For similar formulas, see Whitelock, *Anglo-Saxon Wills*, nos. 16 (*þæra æhta þe him God alāned hæfð* 'of the possessions that God has lent to him'), 31 (*þe þing þe me god hauerð lent so longe so his wille beth* 'the things that God has lent to me for as long as it is his will'), 32 (*þe hire se almyti god yuþe on lyue to brukene* 'that the almighty God has granted her to use while alive') and 33 (*þe me god almithin haue lent on þise liue* 'that God almighty has lent to me in this life').

¹³ Harmer, *Select English Historical Documents*, nos. 4, II.

through inheritance, by paraphrasing Luke 12:16–21, the parable of the rich man who resolves to take his ease, only to be informed by God that he is to die this very night. In the biblical source God asks, *quae autem parasti cuius erunt?* ‘whose shall those things be which thou hast provided?’ The homilist expands the verse in imaginative (if grisly) fashion:

‘Ac hwā fēhð þonne tō þām þe þū lange stryndeð? Oððe hwām gearwodeð þū þīn botl oððe þīne getimbro, nū þīne yrfeweardas leng lyfian ne moton, for þan þū me noldest nānne þanc dōn mīnra gōða?’ Men þā lēofestan, sceoldon þā word bion ealle cūðlice gelæste þe se hælend cwæð. Sōna þā on þone welegan mann on þære ilcan nihte dēaþ on becwōm and on his bearn ealle. Fēngon þā tō gestrēonum fremde syþþan.¹⁴

‘But who then will succeed to that which you spent so long acquiring? Or for whom did you prepare your houses or your buildings, now that your heirs may no longer live, since you would give me no thanks for my goods?’ Most beloved men, clearly all those words that the Saviour spoke had to be carried out. Then immediately in the same night death came upon the rich man and on all his children. Strangers afterwards inherited his property.

Not only the wealthy man himself, but also all his children are wiped out, so that there is no one to inherit his property. To avoid such a terrible fate, the homily makes clear, one must give ‘thanks’ to God by repaying his gifts or loans, especially by giving to the poor, which is the same as giving to God (Matthew 25:31–46, quoted by Ælfric in the homily cited above, ll. 144–79). Tithing is also commonly represented as repayment of God’s bounty, an association that goes back to the influential homily *De reddendis decimis* by the sixth-century preacher Caesarius of Arles: *Deus enim noster, qui dignatus est totum dare, decimum a nobis dignatur repetere, non sibi, sed nobis sine dubio profuturum* ‘Our God who has deigned to give us all condescends to ask of us in return tithes which doubtless will benefit us, not Himself’.¹⁵ One of the Old English ‘Sunday Letter’ homilies threatens those who refuse to tithe in these terms:

¹⁴ Scragg, *Vercelli Homilies*, x.192–9.

¹⁵ Morin, *Caesarii sermones*, xxxiii, p. 143; trans. Mueller, *Caesarius of Arles: Sermons*, p. 163. Blickling Homily IV translates Caesarius (R. Morris, *The Blickling Homilies*), and the sermon was also a source for Ælfric (Pope, *Homilies of Ælfric*, xxx). Vercelli

And gif gē nellað tēoðian ælc þæra þinga þe ēow God lānð on swā hwylcum þingum swā gē hit begytað mid rihte, and tō Godes cyrcan hit getrȳwlice bringan, ic benāme ēow þæra .ix. dāla, and gē sculon þæs tēoþan dāles mid tēonan brūcan; þæt is, þæt ic āsende ofer ēower land ælcne untīman, þæt bið egeslice grēat hagol, se fordēð ēowre wæstmas, and unāsecgendlice þunras and byrnende ligræscas, þā forglendriað ēowre wæstmas ægðer ge on wuda ge on felda; and drūgoða ēow cymð þonne gē rēnas behōfedan and rēn þonne ēowre wæstmas wederes beþorftan, and gýt, þæt is egeslicost ēow eall tō gēfāianne, þæt is þæt ungecyndelic fȳr cymð færunga on ēowre burga and on tūnas and forbærnð þone betstan dæl þe gē big sceoldon libban.¹⁶

And if you will not tithe each of the things that God lends to you (of whatever things you rightfully obtain), and faithfully bring it to God's church, I will deprive you of the nine parts, and you must make use of the tenth part with hardship; that is, that I will send every disaster over your land, that is terrifyingly great hail that will destroy your crops, and unspeakable thunder and burning lightning-bolts that will consume your crops both in wood and in field; and drought will come to you when you needed rains and rain when your crops required fine weather, and yet what is most terrifying of all for you to endure, namely that unnatural fire will come suddenly upon your cities and towns and will burn up the best part of that which you must live by.

These homilies graphically illustrate some of the penalties (sudden death and slow starvation) for failure to reciprocate or repay—the sources of God's ability to exact such penalties being his omnipotence and his status as

Homily XX, though from a different source, similarly regards tithing as repayment of a loan: *Ac utan symle of eallum þām gōdum þe ūs God hēr on worulde lēne hym þā tēoðunga dōn ēadmōdllice; þonne tiðað ūs Dryhten þe rūmōdlicor þāra nigon dāla* 'But let us always, from all the goods that God lends us here in the world, humbly give him the tithe; then the Lord will the more generously grant us the nine parts' (ll. 28–30).

¹⁶ Haines, *Sunday Observance and the Sunday Letter*, text C, ll. 118–31 (p. 138). Another 'Sunday Letter' homily uses similar terms: *gif gē nellað ēow geribtlēcan and sunnandæg ne healdað and ēower tēoðunge getrȳwlice syllað of eallon þām þe ēow Drihten alēned hafað . . . and gif gē nellað gelyfan, gē sculon þolian wīte on helle* 'if you will not reform yourselves and do not hold Sunday and faithfully give your tithe of all that God has lent you . . . and if you will not believe, you must suffer punishment in hell' (*ibid.*, text A, ll. 32–7, p. 114). On the Sunday Letters in England, see Haines's introduction; also Lees, 'The "Sunday Letter" and the "Sunday Lists"' and Faerber, 'La Lettre du Christ'.

ultimate possessor of all worldly goods. His power to reclaim his property is absolute, even when his methods are indirect. God's property rights are acknowledged in Lufu's formulation ('the inheritance that God gave me') and Alfred's ('my inheritance, which God and my ancestors gave me'), but the use of the verb *forgifan* in both documents elides the distinction between loan and gift.

In these homilies and documents God is like a landholder who grants a lease to a property for a limited time. We see just such a landholder in one Ælfēh, son of Ælfstan, who appears in a document concerning a dispute over the estate of Wouldham, Kent:

Þā æfter Ælfstānes dæge wæs Ælfēh his sunu his yrfewærd, and þæt hē belēac on hāle tungon; and oftēah Ælfrice his brēðer landes and æhta būtan hē hwæt æt him geearnode. Ðā for ðære brōðorsibbe geūðe hē him Earhīðes and Crægan and Ænesfordes and Wuldahames his dæg. Ðā oferbād Ælfēh ðæne brōðor and fēng tō his lāne. Þā hæfde Ælfric suna, Ēadric hātte, and Ælfēh nænne; ðā geūðe Ælfēh þām Ēadrice Earhīðes and Crægan and Wuldahames, and hæfde himsylf Ænesford. Þā gewāt Ēadric ær Ælfēh cwidelēas, and Ælfēh fēng tō his lāne. Ðā hæfde Ēadric lāfe and nān bearn; þā geūpe Ælfēh hire hire morgengife æt Crægan.¹⁷

Then after the time of Ælfstan his son Ælfēh was his heir, and he confirmed that in plain language; and he withheld land and possessions from his brother Ælfric unless he should earn something from him. Then, because of their brotherly relationship, he granted him Erith and Cray and Eynesford and Wouldham during his life. Then Ælfēh outlived his brother and succeeded to his loan. Then Ælfric had a son named Eadric, and Ælfēh had none; then Ælfēh granted Erith and Cray and Wouldham to Eadric and held Eynesford himself. Then Eadric died intestate before Ælfēh, and Ælfēh succeeded to his loan. Then Eadric had a widow and no children; then Ælfēh granted to her her morning-gift at Cray.

Ælfēh's grant of land to his brother Ælfric was a loan for the term of his life, in return for some unspecified payment. The Latin version of

¹⁷ S 1458 (Campbell, *Charters of Rochester*, no. 34). A Latin version is edited by Campbell as no. 34b. For summary and discussion, see *ibid.*, pp. xxi–xxii, and Flight, 'Four Vernacular Texts', pp. 137–41.

the text shows clearly that this is how the matter was understood by at least one early reader: *concessit illi Earbetham et Craiam et Æinesfordam et Uuldeham in diebus uite sue tantum in prestito solummodo* 'he gave him Erith and Cray and Eynesford and Wouldham during the days of his life, but only as a loan'. The status of the grant to Eadric, on the other hand, is ambiguous, being described only with the verb *geūðe* 'granted' (Latin *concessit*). A plausible interpretation of the clause containing that verb and those surrounding it is that Ælfelh gave to Eadric as he would to a son, being childless himself, and that he would not have attempted to reclaim the estates if Eadric had fathered children and made a will in their favour. In that case the estates would have remained in the family, but after Eadric's death they were certain to pass to persons unrelated to Ælfelh, unless he could reclaim them. That Eadric regarded the estates as his own property and not as leased or lent is strongly suggested by his having given one of them to his wife as a morning-gift: at the very least the status of the estates must have been ambiguous, as it would not be if he were, say, paying rent.

In the subsequent dispute (Ælfelh willed the land to the Church, but the second husband of Eadric's widow claimed the estates that Eadric had possessed), the status of the grant to Eadric—gift or loan—was surely one of the key points at issue. Other documents relating to this dispute are no longer extant, but the one we have illustrates very well the ambiguity of words like *unnan* 'grant' and how a single transaction might be interpreted differently by various parties.

In Middle English (where the evidence is much more plentiful than in Old English) we find yet more instances of overlap between gift and loan. For example, the entry for *lēnen* 'lend' in the *Middle English Dictionary* lists a number of definitions covering what we think of as gifts, including gifts from God (as in Old English), gifts to the poor, gifts of women in marriage, grants of permission, and so on (*MED*, s.v. *lēnen* v.(3), 1,2). A particularly striking example comes near the beginning of *Lazamon's Brut*, where Ascanius gives Alba Longa and environs to his stepmother Lavinia:

Asscanius heold þis drihliche lond daizes ond zeres,
ond he makede ane heze burh, Albe Lingoe wes ihaten.
þa burh wes wel izarwed binnan lut zearen;
he zef heo his stepmoder for þon lofe of his broþer,

ond Lauinion þene castel ond muchel lond þar-to
 þe his fader hefde imaked þe wile þe he on liue wes.
 Þis lond he hire lende þat come hir lifes ende.¹⁸

Ascanius held this noble land for days and years,
 and he made a high city that was called Alba Longa.
 The city was well built within a few years;
 he gave it to his stepmother for the love of his brother,
 and also the castle Lavinion (and much land along with it)
 that his father had built while he was alive.
 He lent this land to her until the end of her life came.

Ascanius's grant of land to Lavinia is described with two verbs, *ȝef* 'gave' and *lende* 'lent'. The grant can be described as a gift in that Lavinia can freely enjoy it during her lifetime, but *lende* with the temporal clause that modifies it suggests that she cannot bequeath the land to any heir: it will revert to Ascanius after her death. In this sense it resembles the land that Ælfeg granted to his brother Ælfric; yet the transaction can be described with the verb 'give'.

My purpose is not to deconstruct the difference between gifts and loans, but rather to demonstrate their kinship, and in particular how a single transaction may look like a gift from one point of view and like a loan from another. When the *Beowulf* poet uses the verbs *lēon* (1456) and *onlēon* (1467) to describe Unferth's presentation of his sword to Beowulf, he leaves little ambiguity about the mechanical aspects of the transaction: Beowulf receives the weapon now and is required to return it later, as he in fact does. But as a loan is a specialized kind of gift, we may regard this loan as we do other transactions in the Economy of Honour, which I discussed in the preceding chapter. The poet represents this gift—the use of a weapon that has never failed in battle—as extremely valuable:

Wæs þām hæftmēce Hrunting nama.
 Þæt wæs ān foran ealdgestrēona:
 ecg wæs īren, ātertānum fāh,

¹⁸ Brook and Leslie, *Lazamon: Brut*, ll. 110–16. The version cited is the one in London, British Library, Cotton Caligula X. ix. Punctuation has been modernized.

āhyrded heaþoswāte; nǣfre hit æt hilde ne swāc
 manna ængum þāra þe hit mid mundum bewand,
 se ðe gryresīðas gegan dorste,
 folcstede fāra. Næs þæt forma sīð
 þæt hit ellenweorc æfnan scolde. (1457–64)

The name of the hafted sword was Hrunting.
 That was foremost of ancient possessions:
 its edge was iron, adorned with poison twigs,
 tempered in battle-blood; in battle it had never failed
 any man who had grasped it with his hands,
 who dared to undertake horrific journeys
 to the dwellings of the hostile. That was not the first time
 that it should perform a heroic deed.

It seems a sword exactly suited for killing uncanny foes in their lairs (though Unferth has never used it that way); tempered in blood and with poison in its patterned blade, it seems uncanny itself. In its long career of killing it has known only victory and has accumulated great honour. Beowulf temporarily holds the capabilities, the honour and the mystique of what appears an infallible sword, and with it he may win yet more honour for himself.

I detect no irony in the poet's praise of Hrunting, but if that sword is well suited to a monster fight, so is Beowulf's—perhaps it is the same sword with which he slew nine sea monsters during his youthful swimming exploit (574–5). It is not at all clear that Beowulf is better off with Unferth's sword than with his own. Aside from the use of a sword of questionable utility, it is hard to see what in this transaction benefits Beowulf. A gift from Unferth can bestow no more honour than he has got in his personal stock, and, as we saw in the previous chapter, the rank of the gifts Beowulf has already received places him far ahead of any of Hrothgar's thegns in the game of honour. Unferth really has very little to offer to a man of Beowulf's stature.

On the other hand, the lesser warrior has much to gain. Giving a gift—parting with one's property—increases one's honour, and so does lending it, especially for a high-risk venture like diving into a lake to do

battle with a hellish monster.¹⁹ Then, as Hill has pointed out, ‘By accepting the sword and even calling upon it in his battle cry, Beowulf indirectly honours Unferth.’²⁰ This is true; but we also should note how neatly Unferth’s offer manipulates Beowulf into a position where he cannot refuse. While we have so far interpreted the offer as a gift, which imposes obligation, another interpretation, not excluded by the first, is that it is an instance of what the anthropologist David Graeber calls ‘baseline communism’ (note the lower-case c), the system of small gifts and favours, freely given and not accounted for, which exists invisibly alongside systems of exchange and hierarchy and is the real foundation of human society.²¹ Some of Graeber’s examples of ‘communist’ acts, drawn from modern life, are asking someone (very likely a stranger) for directions or to pass the salt, and receiving these things in response; in some societies, items of much greater value may be given in this way—for example, a limited amount of hospitality. But such acts of kindness, even when small, are by no means insignificant: they are an acknowledgment of common membership in some smaller or larger community: a village, a warband, or humanity itself. To the Danish warriors standing on the shore with the two former antagonists, Unferth’s act is likely to have looked less like a transfer of wealth than an offer to consider Beowulf a member of Danish society, and even of his own circle of friends. A refusal of the sword would also have been a refusal of any relationship with Unferth and, through him, the whole of the Danish aristocracy.

Looked at in this way, Unferth’s offer imposes no obligation on Beowulf: he must simply give back the sword. No ‘interest’ (such as a further gift—say, a nice sheath) is required. As Hill’s formulation suggests, simply accepting the sword is in itself a gift of some value. But Unferth may well expect a greater return on his investment. As a player in the game

¹⁹ Indeed, even losing the sword would bring honour, as Unferth has willingly risked its loss. As in potlatch ceremonies where goods are deliberately destroyed, honour can be derived from voluntarily parting with goods, even when they are not given away (Mauss, *The Gift*, pp. 6–7, 16).

²⁰ *Narrative Pulse*, p. 52.

²¹ *Debt: The First 5,000 Years*, ch. 5.

of honour, he ought to be much better off after Beowulf returns from the fight and gives him back his sword.

Unferth's wager

The day that Beowulf arrives in Denmark is a bad one for Unferth. Before that day, no Dane has faced Grendel and survived, and it would be understandable if all Danes now living believed that Grendel could not be killed. One loses no honour in not attempting the impossible. Beowulf's proposal to fight Grendel alters this unpleasant but stable situation: his assertion that Grendel can indeed be killed and his willingness to die while attempting to do so (above, p. 79) instantly devalue the honour of every warrior in Heorot, including Unferth, whom Irving aptly calls the 'Everydane'.²²

From the moment that Unferth delivers his invidious tirade, we are kept informed of his declining fortunes in the Economy of Honour. As Beowulf mocks the failure of Unferth and his comrades to put up any opposition to Grendel, he charges that Unferth has tried to promote greater honour for himself than he deserves (590–4): this, together with a charge of fratricide, delivers to the Dane a crushing defeat in the flyting and the loss of honour that inevitably comes with defeat.²³ We are reminded of Beowulf's taunts when we next see Unferth: *Dā wæs swīgra secg sunu Eclāfes on gylpspræce gūðgeweorca* 'Then the son of Ecglaf was a more silent man in speeches boasting of his warlike deeds' (980–1). With the other men, he is at this moment staring at Grendel's hand, proof that he was wrong about Beowulf's ability to kill the monster. His silence now confirms that he boasted too much before. He has acquiesced in the loss of honour that Beowulf's victories—over both himself and Grendel—have meant for him. We next see him as Wealhtheow makes her stately entrance into a tableau of apparent Danish stability: Hrothgar and Hrothulf sit together, still at peace, and Unferth sits at Hrothgar's feet, trusted and respected despite his treachery towards his brothers (1162–8). The Danes' esteem for Unferth

²² Irving, *Rereading Beowulf*, p. 40.

²³ In 'Beowulf the Orator' I argue that the verbal and the actual battle are in some ways equivalent.

seems hollow, our faith in it undermined not only by the anxiety that pervades the scene,²⁴ but also by the way in which the value of the Danes' good opinion has declined along with their honour.

By the time Unferth presents his sword to Beowulf, he, along with the whole of the Danish aristocracy, is running a considerable deficit in the Economy of Honour. Now he has become a Beowulf partisan, and this is surely to his credit, as nearly all critics agree: but what choice does he have, really? He can't deny the *tācen sweotol* 'clear sign' (833) of Beowulf's victory, and he cannot claim, after twelve years of Danish humiliation, that the defeat of Grendel is no big deal. And the humiliation goes on as, after the attack by Grendel's mother, it does not occur to a grieving and angry Hrothgar to turn for help to Unferth or any other Danish champion; instead, he has Beowulf brought to him and offers him the commission right away. The passage in which Unferth presents his sword is especially concerned to establish two points. One, as noted above (p. 91), is that Hrunting is a very fine weapon for battling uncanny foes. The other is that Unferth, who does not dare to fight Grendel's mother himself, is even now continuing to lose honour:

Hūru ne gemunde mago Ecglāfes
 eafopes cræftig þæt hē ær gespræc
 wīne druncen, þā hē þæs wāpnas onlāh
 sēlran sweordfreca. Selfa ne dorste
 under yða gewin aldre genēþan,
 drihtscype drēogan; þær he dōme forlēas
 ellenmærdum. (1465–71)

Clearly the son of Ecglaf, powerful in his strength,
 did not have in mind what he had spoken before,
 drunk with wine, when he lent the weapon
 to the better sword-warrior. He himself did not dare

²⁴ For the most commonly held position concerning future dynastic difficulties involving Hrothulf, see A. Orchard, *Critical Companion*, pp. 219–20, 246–4. For doubts, see Niles, *Beowulf: The Poem and Its Tradition*, p. 175 and 'Myth and History', p. 226. Niles's dismissal seems too breezy: evidence for later conflict between Hrothulf and Hrothgar's sons is sketchy but not altogether absent: see Chambers and Wrenn, *Beowulf: An Introduction*, pp. 25–7.

to risk his life and perform noble deeds
under the striving waves; there he lost glory,
the reputation for valour.

Here *gemunde* cannot mean 'remembered', implying that Unferth has no memory of what he said while drunk: the present exchange means nothing if he cannot remember the earlier one. Rather, *gemunde* means 'had in mind'. Unferth does not now harbour the angry and envious thoughts he had before; rather, his thoughts are friendly. Before, he hoped that Beowulf's failure would conserve and even increase his stock of honour. Now he has decided that he has a chance to gain honour by betting on Beowulf's success: what he wants this time around is a piece of the action.

The key to understanding how Unferth can profit by lending Beowulf his sword is to remember that in gift exchange subject and object are commensurable (see above, p. 62). If Beowulf survives the battle, the sword he returns to Unferth will be better than the one Unferth gave him. It will have all the qualities the poet has ascribed to it and more: it will be the sword that killed Grendel's mother. As Cherniss has pointed out (above, p. 59), a weapon confers honour upon its owner just as the owner's deeds confer honour upon the weapon. To put it in Maussian terms, *quelque chose* 'something' of Unferth will remain with Hrunting as Beowulf carries it to the bottom of the *mere*, and so something of Unferth will participate in the battle and win honour from Beowulf's victory. It is hard to quarrel with the fairness of such an outcome: Unferth has, after all, shown that he has the wisdom to correct himself and pick a winner, and he has placed a sizeable bet on his champion: why should he not bask in Beowulf's reflected light?

Conversions of defeated enemies into allies are well attested in medieval literary texts; these are often accompanied by religious conversion, which was generally understood as submission. The conversion (after being starved for seven days in a pit) of Judas in *Elene*²⁵ and the befriending of countless foes in romances by Chrétien de Troyes and others provide a

²⁵ In historical texts, religious conversion can be seen as part of process of making allies: see especially the chapter 'Sponsorship in Anglo-Saxon Diplomacy' in Lynch, *Christianizing Kinship*, pp. 205–28 and the comments below on the baptism of Guthrum (pp. 163–4).

model for understanding Unferth's conversion from antagonist to friend without attributing to him cynical or malicious motives.²⁶ His offer of a sword, like most gifts, is friendly as well as self-interested, and it is done with considerable delicacy. Although the offer does little or nothing to enhance Beowulf's honour, it also does not threaten in any way to diminish the honour that he will win if he succeeds in killing Grendel's mother: victory, and the tokens he brings from the battle, will supply his honour, not ownership of the sword with which he does the deed.

Unferth's gift is both a clever and a friendly gesture, and I suspect that all those in the audience who spent their lives within the Economy of Honour, or the real-world analogue of it, would instantly have recognized the advantages that would have accrued to the giver had Hrunting not failed to perform.

Bankruptcy

The fight with Grendel's mother does not go as one might have expected when Unferth lent Beowulf his sword; the result is that he loses honour while Beowulf wins it. Let us survey the narrative, examining the state of Unferth's honour at key points.

Even before his plunge into the *mere*, Beowulf wins honour by virtue of his willingness to assume risk. One effect of his address to Hrothgar before the fight is to remind us of that risk. It is worth quoting in full:

Gefenc nū, se mǣra maga Healfdenes,
 snottra fengel, nū ic eom sīðes fūs,
 goldwine gumena, hwæt wit geō spræcon,
 gif ic æt þearfe þīnre scolde
 aldre linnan, þæt ðū me ā wære
 forðgewitenum on fæder stæle.
 Wes þū mundbora mīnum magoþegnum,
 hondgesellum, gif mec hild nime;
 swylce þū ðā mādmas þe þū mē sealdest,

²⁶ See Rosier, 'Design for Treachery' and A. Hardy, 'The Christian Hero Beowulf'; Hollowell, 'Unferð the *þyle*', p. 261 argues against these positions.

Hrōðgār lēofa, Higelāce onsend.
 Mæg þonne on þāem golde ongitan Gēata dryhten,
 gesēon sunu Hrædles þonne hē on þæt sinc starað
 þæt ic gumcystum gōdne funde
 bēaga bryttan, brēac þonne mōste.
 Ond þū Unferð lāt ealde lāfe,
 wrætlic wægsweord wīdcūðne man
 heardecg habban. Ic mē mid Hruntinge
 dōm gewyrce, oþðe mec dēað nimeð. (1474–91)

Call to mind now, glorious kinsman of Healfdene,
 wise lord, now that I'm eager for my journey,
 gold-friend of men, what we said earlier,
 if I should lose my life while
 serving your needs, that to me, deceased,
 you would always be in the place of a father.
 Be a guardian to my young retainers,
 companions-at-hand, if battle takes me;
 likewise, beloved Hrothgar, send to Higelac
 the treasures that you gave to me.
 The lord of the Geats, son of Hrethel, may then
 perceive by that gold, see when he stares at that treasure
 that I found a giver of rings who excelled
 in many virtues and enjoyed him while I could.
 And let Unferth, that widely known man,
 have my old heirloom, that splendid wave-sword
 with hard edges. I will achieve glory for myself
 with Hrunting, or death will take me.

In a sort of oral will, Beowulf pays judicious compliments, invokes the love that has grown up between Hrothgar and himself, and reminds the king that he is risking his life on Danish business, all with the purpose of ensuring, first, that his men are properly cared for and protected and, second, that the treasure he has won is given to Higelac—as Beowulf will do himself if he survives. Two conditional clauses ('if I should lose my life', 'if battle takes me') remind the king of the likelihood that the hero will not survive. Of greater concern to him than his life, however, are the needs of his men and his host's reputation. He does not think it worth mentioning

that the treasure Hrothgar has given him embodies the honour he has already won, but only that it attests the king's praiseworthy generosity. It is evidence of Hrothgar's greatness that Beowulf wishes Higelac to see, not of his own achievements. Beowulf's honour is now so great that he can afford to seem careless of it.

Beowulf saves Unferth for the end of the speech. In bringing up the matter of the sword, he reminds us that his venture represents a risk for Unferth as well as for himself: if he does not return, neither will Hrunting. In this scene, the first since the flyting in which we see Beowulf and Unferth together, the triumphant hero is solicitous of his former rival's wealth and reputation, and he will continue to be so until the end of his stay in Denmark. Even as Unferth continues to lose honour, it is never suggested that Beowulf is at fault.

But in a gift economy, generosity exacts a price. When Beowulf instructs Hrothgar to let Unferth have his own sword in the event of his death, he is also giving a gift—that of indemnity, which makes it impossible for Unferth to lose his investment in the fight. Further, Beowulf's own sword (we assume it is the one he brought with him, not Hrothgar's gift), though briefly described, is a worthy replacement for Hrunting. It is an old heirloom, *wrætlic* 'splendid' or even 'marvellous', its hard-edged blade attractively welded with wave-like patterns. And if this is the valuable sword with which he *þēnode* 'served' the North Sea monsters he described fighting in his earlier retort to Unferth (560–1; see above, p. 91), then it possesses monster-fighting credentials at least as impressive as those of Hrunting. If this friendly exchange has a competitive aspect (see above, p. 57), then Beowulf has recovered the advantage that Unferth temporarily seized with his gift, and Unferth has lost the honour that comes with having given an unreciprocated gift along with that which comes with risk. These losses, of a sort that is all but inevitable in any series of gift exchanges, do not compare in severity to the loss that Unferth must soon suffer, but it is nevertheless clear that Unferth's campaign to win back his honour is not going well so far.

In the dragon fight we will again see Beowulf's generous impulse not to share risk (2529–35), which incidentally deprives others of the honour that comes with risk-taking. If Beowulf alone ventures his life *under yðā*

gewin 'under the waves' strife', then only he will win honour. He says as much, though unemphatically, with just a pronoun, in his ritual vow: *Ic mē mid Hruntinge dōm gewyrce, oþðe mec dēað nimeð* 'I will achieve glory for myself with Hrunting, or death will take me'.

What happens when Beowulf confronts Grendel's mother is *wīde cūð*. Though Hrunting has in its time sheared through helmets and mail coats, it will not 'bite' when it strikes Grendel's mother, and Beowulf hurls it to the floor in a fury (1522–33). He fights on weaponless until he spots an enormous sword, the work of giants (1557–62). Seizing it, he beheads first Grendel's mother and then Grendel's corpse (1565–8, 1590).

The most common understanding of Hrunting's failure is fully compatible with the reading offered here. Hollowell writes, 'The *þyle* lends an excellent sword, and he lends it in good faith. But the celebrated *þyle* and his celebrated sword are shown to be ineffectual.'²⁷ Her implication that the sword's shortcomings match those of its owner is echoed by Hughes, who, having remarked the glory that Unferth has already lost, says, 'The sword thus becomes symbolic of its owner, and it, too, loses its glory in the subsequent battle.'²⁸ Irving's reading of the failure, though it differs in emphasis from those of Hollowell and Hughes, also recognizes that the sword's abilities match those of its owner: 'Its failure ought probably to be understood as the failure of the normal in such an extraordinary battle: the failure of normal warriors, normal nations, normal swords.'²⁹

Irving's skilful anaphora, 'normal warriors, normal nations, normal swords', resists assigning priority to any particular failure, and it distributes agency widely, to swords as well as to people. Hrunting is not merely 'symbolic' of Unferth; it is an actor in the drama at the bottom of the *mere*, its failure analogous to that of Beowulf's companions at the dragon fight. Its disgrace is returned, in reciprocal fashion, to Unferth just as Unferth conferred his own honours—pedestrian where only marvellous would have sufficed—upon his sword. In failure, Hrunting is no more an alienable possession than it would have been in success, and its owner's honour must

²⁷ 'Unferð the *þyle*', p. 261.

²⁸ 'Beowulf, Unferth and Hrunting: An Interpretation', p. 394.

²⁹ *Rereading Beowulf*, p. 46.

fall with that failure.

After the fight we see nothing of Unferth, and we are invited to imagine the disappointment he must feel only indirectly, through Beowulf's evident desire to underplay the failure of the sword:

Ne meahte ic æt hilde mid Hruntinge
 wiht gewyrcean, þēah þæt wāpen dūge;
 ac mē geūðe ylða waldend
 þæt ic on wāge geseah wlitig hangian
 eald sweord ēacen . . . (1659–63)

I could not achieve anything at battle
 with Hrunting, though that weapon is good;
 but the Ruler of men granted to me
 that I saw hanging on the wall a lovely
 and huge ancient sword . . .

Beowulf dismisses Hrunting's part in the fight in two lines, offsetting its failure with a quick and colourless compliment. He seems to say that neither sword nor owner is much at fault, and in any case the matter is not very important. The following lines supply further exculpation, as Beowulf attributes to God his good luck in finding the giant sword: he can hardly blame Unferth for having provided the wrong weapon on this occasion if he could get his hands on the right one only with divine aid. Thus Beowulf continues his policy of protecting Unferth's reputation.

All that remains is to return the borrowed sword. Beowulf waits until the following morning to give it back, perhaps because to do so right after announcing its failure might have been read as a gesture of contempt: 'your sword didn't work: here, take it back'. To keep it for a few hours more politely intimates that he does not object to wearing it, and perhaps is even a little reluctant to part with it. Beowulf's speech on giving back the sword is reported in indirect discourse:

Heht þā se hearda Hrunting beran
 sunu Ecglāfes, heht his sweord niman,
 lēoflic iren; sægde him þæs lēanes þanc,
 cwæð hē þone gūðwine gōdne tealde

wīgcræftigne, nales wordum lōg
mēces ecge. Ðæt wæs mōdig secg. (1807–12)

Then the fierce one commanded [someone] to carry Hrunting
to the son of Ecglaf, commanded [him] to take his sword,
precious iron; he said thanks to him for the reward,
said he considered the battle-friend to be good
and strong in warfare, with his words did not blame
the sword's edge. That was a brave man!

If, as I suggested above (p. 80), a loan, being a kind of gift, can be a *lēan*, a gift given as a reward or repayment, then the problems that remain are why Beowulf regards the loan of the sword as a *lēan* and why it is appropriate for Unferth to give it. Several possible solutions suggest themselves. One is that Unferth's formal rank in Hrothgar's court is indeed high enough that he can give Beowulf a *lēan* without offence. Another is that Beowulf is paying Unferth a compliment in suggesting that he has such a rank. A third is that Beowulf looks at the loan of the sword as recompense for Unferth's verbal assault on him. Any of these readings would be consistent with Beowulf's repeated statements that the sword is one about which nothing bad can be said, but I prefer the second, in which Beowulf's use of the word *lēan* is itself a gift, offered perhaps in attempted mitigation of the sword's failure, but having, inevitably, the additional effect of enhancing Beowulf's honour.

Until the last moment, Beowulf continues to praise Hrunting, calling it a 'friend in battle' and 'strong in warfare', but his polite formulations have a hollow ring, for the poem's audience and all the Danes understand very well that the sword was not strong enough, and therefore no friend to Beowulf. Unferth had reason to expect the moment when he reclaimed Hrunting to be a triumph, his affiliation with the new saviour of the Danish nation firmly established, his enhanced honour visible to all in his glorious, monster-killing sword. Instead, the Hrunting he will wear from now on is much diminished. The sword he gave to Beowulf had never betrayed any man who had wielded it: it had the mystique of infallibility. The sword he gets back will forever be infamous for having failed when it was most severely tested.

Our common-sense modern expectation is that a transaction like the one between Unferth and Beowulf must be revenue-neutral, the ledger balanced at its end. But this loan is a transaction in the Economy of Honour, where gains and losses are more of honour—the common coin of heroic poetry—than of material wealth. Though the sword at the moment of its return is physically the same as it was before, its value in honour must inevitably rise or fall with use. Hrunting's loss of honour in the fight with Grendel's mother has been catastrophic, and the loss is Unferth's as well, being the last in a series of losses that began when Unferth opened his mouth to mock Beowulf's youthful exploits and continued with every appearance he made.

The poet does not make Unferth a figure of fun, the way the saga-writers do with the braggart *Víga-Hrapp* (above, p. 73), but it is easy to see how he could have been played for comic effect as a character whose efforts to win distinction for himself always end in a pratfall. What saves him from such treatment is his status as a representative of the Danish warrior elite. To make him a clownish figure would have been to make the Danes clownish. As Irving reminds us, Unferth is not interesting for his own sake, but rather 'as a dull foil . . . to set off Beowulf's dazzling superiority'.³⁰ For maximum effect, Beowulf must be contrasted with serious characters: the Danes must remain great so that he may, in rescuing them from ignominy, appear even greater. Still, it is hard to imagine how Unferth could have been more roughly handled. By the time Beowulf hands back Hrunting—as ruined, in its way, as the giant sword whose business end has melted away in Grendel's blood—the *pyle* must be counted as one of the poem's great losers in the Economy of Honour.

³⁰ *Rereading Beowulf*, p. 45.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Angel in the Mead Hall

WE OFTEN READ that women in Anglo-Saxon England had an important role in making and maintaining peace. It is said that queens were often exchanged in marriage between hostile nations as a way of making peace and that they were expected to promote peace both internationally and within the kingdoms to which they had been sent.

It is impossible to prove a negative; but having searched long and hard for evidence that would back up these claims, I have concluded that there is next to none. Rather, our received ideas about women in Anglo-Saxon England can be traced back to the responses of nineteenth-century scholars to one word and one story, both in *Beowulf*: the word *freoðuwebbe* ‘peaceweaver’, used twice of queens in Old English poetry, and the story of Freawaru, who is married to Ingeld of the Heathobards as part of a peace-agreement between that nation and the Danes. These items—one hesitates to call them evidence—are a weak basis for the kind of sweeping generalization we often encounter in the scholarly literature.

This and the following chapter will take a careful look at the history of scholarship concerning the word *freoðuwebbe*, propose an alternative explanation of that word, and offer readings of three of the queens of *Beowulf*, ending with Freawaru, who has set the pattern for much of our thinking about women in Old English poetry. The first two sections of the present chapter digress somewhat from my discussion of the relationship of honour and exchange to violence; but they are necessary preparation for what follows, which I hope will repay the reader’s patience.

The invention of the peaceweaver

The modern history of the peaceweaver begins in 1837 with the translation of *Beowulf* by John Mitchell Kemble. Kemble was not the poem's first translator, but he was the first to translate the compound noun *freoðuwebbe* in l. 1942 correctly as 'weaver of peace'.¹

The context for this word's appearance is what is usually called the Thryth–Offa Digression: it is the story of Thryth,² a woman who causes any man who looks at her by day to be put to death, but who commits less savagery after her father gives her in marriage to Offa of the Angles. The word *freoðuwebbe* occurs in the poet's comment on Thryth's murderous ways. Here is the text with Kemble's translation:

Ne bið swylc cwēnlic þēaw
idese tō efnanne, þēah ðe hīo ænlicu sȳ,
þætte freoðuwebbe fēores onsāce
æfter ligetorne lēofne mannan. (1940–3)

such is no womanly custom for a lady to accomplish, comely though
she be, that the weaver of peace should pursue for his life, should
follow with anger a dear man.³

¹ Thorkelin's lineation of the relevant passage was faulty, splitting *freoðuwebbe* between two lines, and so was his translation: *Non erat tale regali / Aptum foeminæ / Scelus patratum. / Duxit illa similem, / Erant ea eius deliciæ, / Telam vitæ, / Persequendo / Mendaciis insectatos / Fidos viros* (*De Danorum rebus gestis*, p. 146). Conybeare and Madden corrected the lineation in their copies of Thorkelin's *Beowulf*, but not the translation of *freoðuwebbe* (Kiernan, *Electronic Beowulf*). This passage was not included in Conybeare's *Illustrations of Anglo-Saxon Poetry* or in Grundtvig's *Bjowulfs drape*. For early attempts to translate the same word in *Widsith*, see below, n. 4.

² The name is controversial; the beginning of the episode (1931–2), where the woman is named, may be corrupt. Editors and translators variously name her Thryth(o) or Modthryth(o); I have chosen 'Thryth' more on account of its familiarity than because of its probability. The argument in Fulk, Bjork, and Niles, *Klaeber's Beowulf*, pp. 224–5 that her name is Fremu seems to me more ingenious than persuasive.

³ Kemble, *A Translation of the Anglo-Saxon Poem of Beowulf*, p. 79. Other early translators reproduced Kemble's translation, with variations: e.g. 'fridensweberin' (H. Leo, *Bëowulf*, p. 15), 'Friedeweberin' (Ettmüller, *Beowulf*, p. 144), 'Fredsstifterinden' (Schaldemose, *Beo-wulf og scopes Widsið*, p. 91). Joseph Bosworth's less accurate translation of *freoðuwebbe* as 'a love-weaver, a woman' in the supplement to his 1838 *Dictionary of*

The word is also used in *Widsith* of a woman named Ealhild, whom Widsith is said to have accompanied from the Angles to the court of the legendary Gothic king Eormanric, but of her we know little except that she was the daughter of one Eadwine and that she gave a valuable ring to Widsith, who praised her generosity in song.⁴ The word occurs in a third poem, too, Cynewulf's *Elene*, and there it has a masculine ending and refers to an angel who advises the emperor Constantine how to enlist divine aid in the slaughter of his enemies. At a glance, the occurrence in *Elene* seems the odd one out. Certainly Jacob Grimm, that poem's first editor, thought so:

The occupation of weaving, on the other hand, was appropriate to women and servants; *frīðo* here seems to me to signify the quiet of the household, house-peace; and *frīðoweþba*, *frīðoscealc*, *frīðoweþbe* are beautiful nouns which prove to us the appreciation of antiquity for domestic happiness; and so it is inappropriate here for the poet to allow a peace-weaving messenger to appear in a dream to the warlike hero.⁵

the Anglo-Saxon Language, p. 692, is derived from a note on *Widsith* by Richard Price in Conybeare, *Illustrations of Anglo-Saxon Poetry*, p. 280; he was followed, elegantly but erroneously, in Guest, *A History of English Rhythms*, p. 79: 'artificer of love'.

⁴ On the difficult problem of the identity of Ealhild Malone, *Widsith*, pp. 140–2 is still relevant. The common assumption that the purpose of her marriage was to patch up some kind of quarrel is perfectly circular, based entirely on her being called a *freopuweþbe*. The idea that the purpose of Ealhild's journey was 'a marriage alliance' goes back to Richard Price's comments on *Widsith* in Conybeare, *Illustrations of Anglo-Saxon Poetry*, p. 279; and it seems implicit in those comments that Price understood the word *freopuweþbe* as relating to marriage. Developing the idea, H. Leo, *Altsächsische und angelsächsische Sprachproben*, p. 75 wrote of Ealhild as a princess 'welche als Frīdenswerberin der Sānger zu Eormanrika begleitet' ('whom as a peace-envoy the singer accompanies to Eormanric'). Leo's translation of *freopuweþbe* suggests that by 1838 the understanding of that word as relating to marriage was not firmly in place. Ettmüller, *Scōpes Vīdsīðh*, p. 1 (published in part to correct Leo's 'sehr leichtfertig' edition (p. 11)) translates *freopuweþban* in *Widsith* as 'Friedeweberin' and explains, 'Sie wird als Friedeweberin zu Eormanric (Ermanarich) gesandt, wie es scheint, auf welcher Reise der Sānger sie begleitet' ('She will be sent as peace-envoy [retaining Leo's translation in the note] to Eormanric (Ermanarich), as it seems, on which journey the singer accompanies her', p. 12, a comment clearly based on Leo). H. Leo, *Bēowulf* translates *freoðuweþbe* in l. 1942 as 'frīdensweberin' (see n. 3).

⁵ Grimm, *Andreas und Elene*, pp. 144–5: 'Das geschäft des webens lag wiederum frauen

Grimm's disapproval of Cynewulf's use of *frīðowebba* to refer to a warlike (and male) angel is odd, considering the distribution of poetic *frīðo*- compounds (which his citation of *frīðoscealc* shows that he was at least partly aware of):

- *freoðuwebbe*, *Beowulf* 1942, of Thryth
- *freoðuwebban* (dat. sg.), *Widsith* 6, of Ealhild
- *frīðowebba*, *Elene* 88, of an angel
- *frīðusibb* (*sibb* 'kinship, peace'), *Beowulf* 2017, of Wealhtheow
- *freoðoscealc*, *freoðoscealcas* (*scealc* 'servant, retainer'), *Genesis A* 2303, 2498, of angels
- *freoðuweard* (*weard* 'guardian'), *Guthlac A* 173, of an angel

Looking at a list like this one, unbiased by other considerations, some might be led to wonder what queens and angels were thought to have in common, that both could be referred to with these compounds. But Grimm, far from being unbiased, appears to have approached this material with an already firm conviction that the *frīð* 'peace' that these words related

und knechten ob, frīðo scheint mir hier die ruhe des haushalts, den hausfrieden zu bezeichnen und frīðowebba, frīðoscealc, frīðowebbe sind schöne namen, die uns den sinn des alterthums für häusliches glück bewähren, so unpassend auch der dichter einen friedewebenden boten hier dem kriegesischen helden im traum erscheinen lässt.' Weaving was done mostly but not exclusively by women (see Owen-Crocker, *Dress in Anglo-Saxon England*, pp. 272–315; Rogers, *Cloth and Clothing*, pp. 45–7). As a figure of speech, though (which is what we are surely dealing with here), weaving was not strongly gendered. The Greek *μοῖραι* and Roman *parcae* were women and spinners, and the Norse *norns* could be as well (perhaps by classical influence? see *Helgakviða Hundingsbana* 2–3); the valkyries could be depicted as weavers, as in *Njáls Saga* ch. 157 (using unconventional materials). In the Old Testament the cloth on a loom can symbolize a life: so Job 7:6, explicated by Gregory the Great, *Moralia in Iob* II.viii.11 with interesting details about the operation of the loom (Adriaen, *S. Gregorii Magni Moralia in Iob*, i.399–400), and also Isaiah 38:12, from which Haymo, in *Commentaria in cantica aliquot*, draws the obvious conclusion: *textor meus, scilicet Deus* 'my weaver, that is, God' (*PL* cxvi. 695). For Ambrose, the weaver is the theologian who *legem intexunt* 'weaves the law' (Petschenig and Zelzer, *Ambrosi expositio Psalmi CXVIII*, ii.23, p. 33). Gradon, *Cynewulf's Elene* glosses *frīðowebba* as 'angel' without further comment.

to must be of the domestic variety, and so he declined to go where the evidence of the primary sources might have led him. Where did his bias come from?

In 1840, when Grimm published his edition of *Elene*, the best expression of the conventional wisdom concerning women in Anglo-Saxon England was probably to be found in Sharon Turner's *History of the Anglo-Saxons*, published in four volumes between 1799 and 1805. In the last of these volumes, broadly cultural in its orientation, he included a short chapter on marriage, which begins thus:

It is well known that the female sex were much more highly valued and more respectfully treated by the barbarous Gothic nations than by the more polished states of the East. Among the Anglo-Saxons they occupied the same important and independent rank in society which they now enjoy. They were allowed to possess, to inherit, and to transmit landed property; they shared in all the social festivities; they were present at the Witenagemot and the Shire Gemot; they were permitted to sue and be sued in the courts of justice; their persons, their safety, their liberty, and their property, were protected by express laws, and they possessed all that sweet influence which, while the human heart is responsive to the touch of love, they will ever retain in those countries which have the wisdom and the urbanity to treat them as equal, intelligent, and independent beings.⁶

Turner further explains the nature of the 'sweet influence' of Anglo-Saxon women, and explains how their 'high rank' was a benefit to society:

As the education of youth will always rest principally with women in the most ductile part of life, it is of the greatest importance that the fair sex should possess high rank and estimation in society, and nothing could more certainly tend to perpetuate this feeling than the privilege of possessing property in their own right, and at their own disposal. (p. 113)

These short passages might well serve as an introduction to nineteenth-century ideas about women. Especially notable are the rhetoric of loving

⁶ Rather than number the volumes of his *History*, Turner titled them separately. This one is *The History of the Manners, Landed Property, Government, Laws, Poetry, Literature, Religion, and Language, of the Anglo-Saxons*; the passage occurs on p. 108.

condescension; the self-congratulatory contrast between the 'Gothic' and other nations (for other writers they are not always 'Eastern'); the assumption that whatever status and rights women had were conferred by men (they were 'allowed to possess', 'permitted to sue', 'protected' by presumably male-written laws); the implication that women's proper sphere of 'influence' was the home (even if they were allowed out to attend the *gemōt*) and their eternal duty the education of children. Finally, and most importantly, notice Turner's conviction that the women of Anglo-Saxon England must have been in all essentials like those of his own time, having the same status, rights and obligations.

Kemble did not annotate 'weaver of peace' in his translation of *Beowulf*, but in his *Saxons in England*, published in 1849, he had some things to say about women in Germanic cultures:

The German house was a holy thing; the bond of marriage a sacred and symbolic engagement; holy above man was woman herself. Even in the depths of their forests the stern warriors had assigned to her a station which nothing but that deep feeling could have rendered possible: this was the sacred sex, believed to be in nearer communion with divinity than men. (i. 234)

To illustrate the high and divine status of 'woman', Kemble discussed Norse shieldmaidens and valkyries, the role of women in religious rituals, and the protections the laws afforded them, but he also insisted on the ways their influence was circumscribed:

That woman, nevertheless, *in the family*, held a subordinate situation to men, lies in the nature of the family itself, and in the disposition and qualities which have been implanted in woman, to enable her to fulfil her appointed duties in the scheme of Providence; qualities not different in *degree*, but *kind*, from those of her helpmate, that they may be the complement of his, and united with his, make up the full and perfect circle of humanity. As an individual, woman was considered a being of a higher nature; as a member of the state, she was necessarily represented by him upon whom nature had imposed the joyful burthen of her support, and the happy duty of her protection,—a principle too little considered by those who, with a scarcely pardonable sciolism, have clamoured for what they call the rights of woman. Woman among the Teutons was near akin to divinity, but not

one among them ever raved that the *femme libre* could be a *woman*.

Hence the profound importance attached to chastity, and the undoubted influence of alliances by marriage . . . (i. 233–4)

In Kemble's view, the qualities of women that exclude them from the public sphere are eternal, being divinely 'implanted': it is the genius of the warrior ancestors of the English that they recognized those qualities and 'assigned' to women duties in keeping with them. The English of Kemble's time, merely by continuing to treat women as their ancestors did, have become the happy heirs to a harmonious system of gender relations perfectly consistent with what God intended. Kemble cites no sources to support his statements, and it seems there are none; presumably his reasoning is that, since the qualities of men and women are inborn and immutable, what he believes to be true for the women of his own time must also have been true for those of Anglo-Saxon England.

Kemble adds a footnote to the phrase 'the undoubted influence of alliances by marriage' at the end of the passage quoted above:

A beautiful evidence of this lies in the epic name for woman: in Anglosaxon poetry she is called *freoðowebbe*, *the weaver of peace*.

The note connects *freoðuwebbe* with marriage, reflecting, probably, the idea that the word relates to the custom of giving women in marriage to settle disputes between nations. This connection was first proposed by Ludwig Ettmüller in a footnote to line 1942 of his German translation of *Beowulf*, published in 1840:

Weaver of peace, giver of peace, that is, wife, because marriages between opposing groups often took place in concluding peace?⁷

It is a tentative suggestion (notice the question mark), offered entirely without supporting evidence, but later editors of *Beowulf*, repeating Ettmüller's conjecture, dropped the question mark. For example, in the first edition of Moritz Heyne's edition of *Beowulf* (1863) the glossary entry for *freoðuwebbe* is as follows:

⁷ *Beowulf*, p. 144: 'Friedeweberin, Friedensstifterin, d.i. Frau, weil oft bei Friedensschlüssen gegenseitige Vermählungen Statt fanden?'

freoðo-webbe, weak f. *pacis textrix* [weaver of peace], designation of a royal consort (often given in marriage to establish peace between two nations).⁸

Yet no one between 1840 and 1863 had offered evidence that could justify the increased confidence of Heyne's glossary. Indeed, as Larry M. Sklute argued in 1970, no evidence connecting *freoðuwebbe* (or the related word *frīðusibb*) with marriage for the purpose of making peace has ever been offered.⁹ Attempts since 1970 to rehabilitate the connection have been unpersuasive,¹⁰ and yet numerous writers accept it—presumably because it just seems right.¹¹ And once an idea is established in the scholarly literature one can get away with pasting in a citation or two on the assumption that someone must have supplied the proof at some time in the past.

While *freoðuwebbe* was being annotated and glossed by scholars, it was also entering the popular discourse in both Germany and England. It is not surprising to see it used in poems on legendary or historical themes like

⁸ *Beovulf mit ausführlichem Glossar*, p. 173: 'freoðo-vebbe, sw. f. *pacis textrix*, Bezeichnung der (oft zur Befestigung des Friedens zweier Völker zur Ehe gegebenen) königlichen Gemahlin.' See also the glossary in Grein, *Beovulf nebst den Fragmenten Finnsburg und Valdere*, which echoes that of Heyne. Grein's earlier *Sprachschatz der angelsächsischen Dichter*, i. 344, on the other hand, is more cautious, glossing *freoðuwebbe* as '*pacis textrix*, i.e. *mulier*.'

⁹ Sklute, "Freoðuwebbe" in Old English Poetry' (reprinted with the author's name as L. John Sklute in Damico and Olsen, *New Readings*, pp. 204–10).

¹⁰ The best such attempt is Hall, 'Hygelac's Only Daughter', p. 85 (citing with approval Hill, *Anglo-Saxon Warrior Ethic*, pp. 64 and 153 n.8): 'Sibb, when denoting a person, is surely to be taken in the sense "relation" or, if the person is to be understood metaphorically as their place in a kin-group, "relationship", making Wealhtheow the "peace-relation(ship) of the peoples". Much the most likely interpretation of this is that Wealhtheow was married from the Helmingas to the Danes, in an inter-group exchange which was surely successful.' It is rather a logical broad-jump to characterize Wealhtheow's marriage from one possible definition of *sibb*. Hall also assumes without evidence that the group called the Helmings is a nation like the Danes, as opposed to a family or clan.

¹¹ For example, Overing, *Language, Sign, and Gender*; Hollis, *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church*; Enright, *Lady with a Mead Cup*; Klein, *Ruling Women*; and (cautiously) Scheck, *Reform and Resistance*, pp. 117–18. Several scholars have expressed skepticism about the conventional understanding of *freoðuwebbe*, among them Lawrence, 'Structure and Interpretation of *Widsith*', pp. 349–51; Sklute, "Freoðuwebbe" in Old English Poetry'; Olsen, 'Gender Roles', p. 316.

Karl Joseph Simrock's *Heldenbuch* (1842) and Wilhelm Osterwald's *König Älfred* (1855).¹² It is perhaps a better sign of its popular appeal that we find it in Julius Rodenberg's verse adaptation of *Dornröschen* (the story known to English speakers as 'Sleeping Beauty'), where the seventh of the wise women gives the young heroine advice along with her gift:

'Das Glück der Erde gebe ich Dir' die siebente spricht;
 'Doch suche Dus nicht draußen, Du findest es draußen nicht.
 Doch suche es im Hause und finde es darin;
 O was Du sein sollst, werde: —des Hauses Friedensweberin!'

'I give you worldly joy', says the seventh,
 'but do not seek it outside, you'll not find it outside.
 Rather, seek it in the house and find it there;
 O, be what you ought to be: the peace-weaver of the house!'

As for Grimm (to whom Rodenberg dedicated his poem), this peaceweaver is above all one who promotes domestic happiness. Associated with the concept is an admonition, which Kemble no doubt approved if he read this work, that the business of the 'Friedensweberin' is to promote peace in the home, not 'draußen' in the wider world.¹³

English poets began to celebrate the peaceweaver several decades later than the Germans, but popular historians took note of it. For example, Thomas Milner, in his *History of England* (1853) aimed at 'schools and families', noted the 'force and beauty' of the metaphors of Old English poetry, 'as when the sun is styled "the candle of God;" the ocean, "the sea-fowl's bath;" the ship, "a traveller that leaves no footmark;" and woman, "the weaver of peace"' (p. 68). John Thrupp (an interesting dissenter from

¹² Simrock, *Das Heldenbuch*, p. 308: 'Der Frau schönster Namen ist Friedeweberin'; Osterwald, *König Älfred*, p. 17: 'Du holde Friedeweberin, / ich muss dir danken bis ans Lebensende'.

¹³ The concept is also employed outside its usual domain in Palleske, *Schiller's Leben und Werke*, ii. 354–5, discussing *Die Jungfrau von Orleans*: 'Wie tragisch vollends ist es, wenn die Friedeweberin, mit diesem schönen Namen nannten unsere Altvordern das Weib, Hasses- und Todesweberin werden, den Männern im blutigen Werk vorangehen muß, um zu zeigen, wie mächtig der Geist auch im Schwachen ist'; and he refers to Johanna as a 'Friedeweberin', a description picked up by some later commentators.

the orthodox view that Anglo-Saxon men treated their women well¹⁴) thought the poetry 'little else than a collection of metaphors very inartistically strung together' (p. 327), but had to admit that 'one that is used for a woman is very pretty; she is called "the weaver of peace," in allusion to her ordinary domestic occupation, and one of her sweetest privileges' (p. 329). And Thomas Wright, in his *Womankind in Western Europe* (1869), wrote of *freoðuwebbe* (which he erroneously called 'the metaphor usually employed in Anglo-Saxon poetry for a woman'), 'The beauty of the metaphor will be still better appreciated if we bear in mind that the chief domestic occupation of Womankind among the different branches of the Teutonic race, was weaving. It is an assertion of one of the most precious attributes of the sex' (p. 26).

Weaving is only one of the 'privileges' and 'attributes' of 'Womankind', standing metonymically for a whole complex of womanly functions, among which, for our purposes, the most important are keeping the peace in the household, selflessly seeing to the needs of husband and children and by her loving influence bringing about their improvement—all while cheerfully accepting her subordinate position in the domestic hierarchy. These are the qualities celebrated by George T. Coster, congregational minister in Hull, in his poem 'The Weaver of Peace', published in 1886 and quoted here in full:

Weaver of peace! a pleasant phrase
For women in old Saxon days,
Telling of work more beautiful
Than any in the flax or wool.

And still, with gentle heart, and word
In which the gentle heart is heard,

¹⁴ Thrupp's remarks in *The Anglo-Saxon Home* (1862) are aimed mainly at Turner (quoted above). For example, 'In contradiction to the generally received opinion, it may be said, that the Anglo-Saxon women were, at one time, sold by their fathers and always beaten by their husbands; that they were menial servants even when of royal rank; that they were habitually subject to coarse personal insult; and that they were never addressed, even in poetry, in the language of passion or respect' (p. 21). The sources from which Thrupp drew such conclusions were, of course, largely the same ones examined by Turner and Kemble.

She weaves, though ages since have run[,]
The various-minded house in one.

The cares of others all her own
She makes, forgetting self alone;
Their joy is hers, with them she grieves,
And thus all hearts together weaves.

Blest home that knows her silent skill,
The ageing husband lover still,
The children kindred more than birth
Can make them—home the heaven of earth.

O happy she! and happy they
For whom she labours day by day,
Weaving, as only woman can,
Peace in the loom of love for man.¹⁵

Coster had likely read Wright's *Womankind*, perhaps also Milner and even Kemble, but the greatest influence here is surely Coventry Patmore's *Angel in the House*, published in 1854 to little acclaim, but immensely popular and influential by the 1880s.¹⁶

Patmore's views on womanhood and family are everywhere evident in his long poem, but more clearly and succinctly stated in a review, published in February 1851, of Maria G. Grey and Emily Shirreff, *Thoughts on Self-Culture, Addressed to Women* and S. Margaret Fuller, *Woman in the*

¹⁵ *Red Roofs*, pp. 57–8. Other uses of 'peaceweaver' or 'weaver of peace' in popular English (and American) literature of the long nineteenth century include John Wood Warter, *An Old Shropshire Oak* (1886–91), i. 92; William Sharp ('Fiona MacLeod'), *The Washer of the Ford and Other Legendary Moralities* (1896), p. 125; 'Apologist', *The Epic of Humanity* (1898), p. 129; John Lesslie Hall, *Old English Idyls* (1899), p. 23; and Ottilia Adelina Liljencrantz, *The Ward of King Canute: A Romance of the Danish Conquest* (1903), p. 333.

¹⁶ On the reception of *Angel in the House*, see Anstruther, *Coventry Patmore's Angel*, pp. 74–100. By 1887 the work was considered such a classic that it was included in the 'National Library', a series of cheap printings of classical authors. This edition of *Angel in the House* sold 40,000 copies in the first fortnight after publication (*ibid.* pp. 97–8).

Nineteenth Century.¹⁷ The first of these books is a conservative tract on women's education, which Patmore praises; the second is remembered as a foundational work on women's rights, and rather than reviewing that one book, Patmore complains in general about the feminist literature then being published in certain other countries (though not—he says, gratefully if not quite accurately—in England):

America, France, and Germany, in doleful chorus, lament the slavery of woman, and the tyranny of man. Masculine and feminine are proclaimed to be accidents of organization, which ought in no way to affect the relationship of souls. The woman's excellent privilege of subordination, and the man's ennobling responsibility as chief, are declared to be the prime evils, which have preyed, 'fell and forgotten,' on the heart of society, ever since the days of the first despot, Adam. (p. 515)

For Patmore, 'The social subordination of woman to man is a law of nature: it is not a thing that can ever be reasonably called into question' (p. 518). The idea of women voting or serving in parliament he regards as insane (p. 524). And yet:

The position of woman is, at present, one of almost total *external* subjection. Laws which nearly concern her are made without her subscription; if her interests seem to clash with those of man, it is she who has to yield. She has powers, however, of which neither legislation nor social customs can deprive her. To her by nature is allotted the power first of forming, and afterwards of inevitably influencing the minds of men. A glance at the history of the world will shew how extended and important for good or for evil, the exercise of this power has always been. In those countries and times in which woman's condition and influence have been most highly esteemed, men have been brave and good; where her position has been degraded to that of a slave, men have themselves become worthless slaves. The influence of woman over man is twofold; for not only does the mother mould the mind and disposition of her children, but she exercises over the mind of her husband an almost equal power: either through the passions only, as has been the case in the most degraded periods, or through the affections. (p. 530)

¹⁷ 'Social Position of Women', pp. 515–40. For the attribution, see Anstruther, *Coventry Patmore's Angel*, pp. 67–8.

One of the 'countries and times' in which women were highly esteemed was that of the 'ancient German barbarians', who in Patmore's view treated their women better than the modern French (p. 518). To earn such esteem, and perform well the duties that God and nature had assigned her, a woman had to be strong and intelligent:

The weak mind, distracted by alternations of feeling, and constant craving for help and sympathy from others, cannot, at the same time, possess that tenderness and unselfish devotion, which is the loveliest trait of the female character. Love loses its chief beauty by weakness and dependence. It is power and self-sacrifice that give to affection so exalted a character, that, whether we see it exercised in the hour of trial, or in the constant forgetfulness of everyday life, we feel it to be of divine origin. (p. 535)

A woman's highest goal—no easy thing, it is a strenuous occupation, requiring training—should be to love and live for others, 'forgetting self alone'. Her responsibility is to influence men for good. At the extremes of this kind of thinking, women can even be held responsible for evils that men commit. Thus John Ruskin (who was well aware of the Anglo-Saxon past, even if he had no very firm grip on it), in his lecture 'Lilies: Of Queens' Gardens':

There is not a war in the world, no, nor an injustice, but you women are answerable for it; not in that you have provoked, but in that you have not hindered. Men, by their nature, are prone to fight; they will fight for any cause, or for none. It is for you to choose their cause for them, and to forbid them when there is no cause. There is no suffering, no injustice, no misery in the earth, but the guilt of it lies lastly with you. Men can bear the sight of it, but you should not be able to bear it. Men may tread it down without sympathy in their own struggle; but men are feeble in sympathy, and contracted in hope; it is you only who can feel the depths of pain; and conceive the way of its healing.¹⁸

Ruskin's views on women can be idiosyncratic and his expression here is hyperbolic, and yet the thought is not inconsistent with what we have observed in Patmore. Even keeping to the home, as the seventh wise woman

¹⁸ *Sesame and Lilies*, pp. 113–14.

recommends to Dornröschen, a woman's influence extends 'draußen', outside, through her children and husband: she bears some of the responsibility for things that go right and wrong in the world. And her responsibility is all the heavier in that she cannot fulfil it merely by being a woman and bearing children: weaving peace is a thing that she must do consciously and with effort.¹⁹ A. Diedrich Wackerbarth's early translation of *Beowulf* takes this view of woman's role in translating our Thryth passage:

Unqueenlike deed, unseemly too
For Dame however fair to do,
That she who 's wont to settle Strife
And Peace's Web to weave,
Should seek a gentle Thane of life
In Fury to bereave. (p. 75)

Kemble's phrase 'weaver of peace' is expanded to become a pronoun with a relative clause containing two 'action verbs'. The ideal woman is no more passive than these verbs: she has a hard job to do.

Peace-weaving is both a domestic and a political idea, a role for both housewives and queens. Much of the power it had for nineteenth-century scholars and popularizers was in the way they could see it as expressing the mysterious connection between domesticity and political power. This was especially so for the English, ruled by a woman whom they glorified as both ideal mother and benevolent ruler of an empire. An anonymous essay for the *London Review* of July 1859, discussing (belatedly) Kemble's *Saxons in England* and two other books,²⁰ employs the figure to allegorize the British Raj in India, figured as the reunification of two long-separated

¹⁹ Patmore, 'Social Position of Women', p. 537: 'It seems a general opinion, that a woman's uneducated feelings and instincts will fit her for domestic life. In truth, they will do little more than endow her with a mere animal love for her husband and children. They will not teach her how to act in the critical difficulties with which life is fraught, and on the surmounting of which depends the happiness or misery of herself and her family'.

²⁰ 'The Teutonic Tribes in England', pp. 355–87; also reprinted in *The Eclectic Magazine*, Sept. 1859, 76–83. The other books under review were R. G. Latham, ed., *The Germania of Tacitus, with Ethnological Dissertations and Notes* (1851) and George Webbe Dasent, *Popular Tales from the Norse* (1859).

branches of a family (this is a little more than a year after the bloody suppression of the Indian Rebellion of 1857):

The emigrant families, who had gone off right and left, were long divided. At length, however, the descendants of the younger branch found their way around to the land where the elder brethren of the dispersion had settled. There was a meeting, and a feud, terrible for a time, as family feuds too often are; but now, a lady from the royal line of the Western Islanders holds her sceptre over the scene of strife, and illustrates the beautiful title of the Anglo-Saxon woman, *Freothowebbe*, 'the weaver of peace.' (p. 365)

Here Queen Victoria, as the peacemaker of the allegory, is imagined as doing for nations what the ideal woman of Patmore's essay did for the household, and by similar means. The bloody and sometimes barbarous deeds that the army has done in her name are subsumed by the idea of 'feud', redolent of a distant and romantic past, while 'now' her sceptre alone—which seems to symbolize her role as head of a family as much as of an empire—stills the conflict. The analogy between the queen's family and her empire was already present, though less fully formed, in the Preface to Kemble's *Saxons in England*, which he dedicated to her:²¹

On every side of us thrones totter, and the deep foundations of society are convulsed. Shot and shell sweep the streets of capitals which have long been pointed out as the chosen abodes of order: cavalry and bayonets cannot control populations whose loyalty has become a proverb here, whose peace has been made a reproach to our own miscalled disquiet. Yet the exalted Lady who wields the sceptre of these realms, sits safe upon her throne, and fearless in the holy circle of her domestic happiness, secure in the affections of a people whose institutions have given to them all the blessings of an equal law. (i. v)

Writing amid the revolutions of 1848, to which the British were largely spectators, Kemble attributed the blessing of British stability to his countrymen's preservation of their ancient 'institutions'—among them the family, which the Anglo-Saxons had gotten right.

²¹ 'TO | THE QUEEN'S MOST EXCELLENT MAJESTY, | THIS HISTORY | OF THE PRINCIPLES WHICH HAVE GIVEN HER EMPIRE | ITS PREEMINENCE | AMONG THE NATIONS OF EUROPE, | IS, | WITH HER GRACIOUS PERMISSION, | INSCRIBED BY | THE MOST HUMBLE AND DEVOTED | OF HER SERVANTS' (i. iii).

I break no new ground in noting the connection in the Victorian popular imagination between domestic and national greatness, nor that the conceit of the empire as a family with a gentle queen at its head masked the extremes of violence that were the actual means by which the empire was maintained. And what Kemble, Patmore and other like-minded men had to say in reaction to an as yet small but growing feminist movement in England and elsewhere is, as a scholar of the period kindly informed me, 'Victorianism 101'. But it is essential to understand the cultural context in which the ideas grew up that still govern our thinking about the word *freoðuwebbe*: that it must refer to a queen exchanged between nations for the purpose of making peace and that the most fundamental duty of such a queen was to work for peace. After all, isn't this what every women did? Not, of course, the *femme libre* of Kemble's nightmares²² or horrid creatures like Margaret Fuller, whose work Patmore could not even bring himself to speak of directly—in fact, perhaps not any *real* woman at all, for we have not been discussing the actual conditions in which nineteenth-century women lived, but a fantasy woman, the creation of men's desires, emblemized in modern criticism by such figures as Patmore's Honoria (heroine of *The Angel in the House*²³) and David Copperfield's 'good angel' Agnes.

In popular literary criticism the Anglo-Saxon woman could become

²² It is worth mentioning here (without falling into the biographical fallacy) that Kemble was, at the time he wrote *The Saxons in England*, going through what is now called 'a messy divorce'. He had married a German woman and was now in Germany seeking a way to end his marriage quietly, without having to endure the public humiliations of divorce in Britain, which required a private act of parliament with a public hearing in the House of Lords (Wiley, *John Mitchell Kemble and Jakob Grimm*, pp. 265–6, 271–3, 275–6, 283, 284–5, 292).

²³ Not, according to criticism, the angel of the title, which is Love itself. However, for Patmore women are angelic. For example, at the beginning of Canto IV: 'And still with favour singled out, / Marr'd less than man by mortal fall, / Her disposition is devout, / Her countenance angelical; / The best things that the best believe / Are in her face so kindly writ / The faithless, seeing her, conceive / Not only heaven, but hope of it.' And of Honoria in particular, in Canto X, 'Going to Church', section 6: 'she seem'd to be / An angel teaching me to pray'. Patmore's usage is of course consistent with that of legions of writers who have compared women to angels.

every bit as much a fantasy creature as Patmore's Honoria or Dickens's Agnes, as she is in Edmund Dale's *National Life and Character in the Mirror of Early English Literature*:

In the home life the Englishwoman played a most important part. The heroines of these early days were almost invariably of noble character, loving to their husbands, affectionate to their children, tender and pure of heart, bearing themselves with true womanly dignity and reserve, and in every way winning the respect and chivalrous homage of the men. Woman was no slave, but had her mission in life, and that a noble one, making for harmony and peace. Her poetic title, 'peace-weaver' or 'love-weaver,' is very significant, and was derived from the custom of giving kinswomen in marriage to settle feuds and cement alliances.²⁴

Here, in a single naïve package, is almost everything we have been discussing: the selfless woman who gives her all to husband and children, the queen who makes and maintains peace in the mead hall and among the nations as she does in her own family, and an implication that the foundation of modern English greatness is the Anglo-Saxon ideal of the family. It was all a beautiful fantasy, and still by the end of the long nineteenth century it was no more than that.

The legacy of the peaceweaver

Nineteenth-century writers celebrated the peaceweaver as an ideal figure of womanhood, scarcely ever mentioning the word without exclaiming at its beauty. Though she was less often spoken of in the succeeding era (see fig. 4), she was not forgotten, but modernism transformed her from an object of desire to one of pity. An early (perhaps the earliest) sign of this transformation is the treatment of *Wealhtheow* in Lee Hollander's free translation of Axel Olrik's *Danmarks Heltedigtning* (1903), published in 1919 under the title *Heroic Legends of Denmark*. Olrik himself was not

²⁴ P. 45. The somewhat earlier discussion by the American critic Richard Burton avoids Dale's generalization that early Germanic women were a gentle lot; yet he accepts the peaceweaver narrative and sees 'feminine gentleness' as 'innate' ('Woman in Old English Poetry', p. 6).

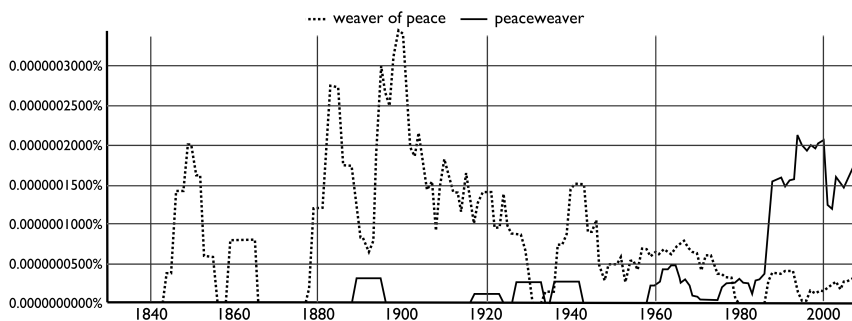


Figure 4: The Google Ngram Viewer (<http://books.google.com/ngrams/>) measures the relative popularity of words and phrases. This is the ngram for ‘weaver of peace’ (the dotted line) and ‘peaceweaver’ (the solid one).

terribly interested in Wealhtheow, deducing from her name that she was probably an English addition to what he believed to be the original Danish story, but for Hollander she was ‘a *fríðo-webbe* or “weaver-of-peace,” of the most outspoken character’, ‘the wise and farsighted peacemaker’ (p. 64). So far Hollander sounds *almost* like a Victorian. But his peaceweaver is a tragic figure: she ‘seeks to maintain peace’ (p. 60), but as strife looms within the Danish royal house ‘her endeavors to avert the coming tragedy are in vain; her rôle is to look on powerless whilst all her wishes come to naught’ (*ibid.*).

A few years later, W. W. Lawrence performed much the same manoeuvre in discussing Hildeburh of the Finn episode. She had long been recognized as a tragic figure, and it had been conjectured, by comparison with Freawaru, that she might have been married to Finn as part of a peace agreement.²⁵ Lawrence, however, makes her a peaceweaver—the word still beautiful, but with tragic associations:

Were the Danes themselves in some degree responsible for the quarrel? We cannot tell. It is easy however, to recognize typical situations of Germanic poetry,—the princess married as a ‘peace-weaver’ to a foreign king, who has earlier been hostile to her people; the treacherous hospitality with murder

²⁵ See, e.g., Simrock’s discussion of the Finn episode in his translation of *Beowulf*, pp. 187–91.

looming up darkly in the background; the bloody hall-fight after a night-attack; and the sufferings of the unhappy lady.²⁶

Lawrence dwells upon the horror of her years of marriage to a 'hated foe-man', one who is responsible for the deaths of kinsmen (p. 115), and his rhetoric stirs so powerful a sympathetic response that it takes some effort to recall that none of this is in the poem.

It is a sign of the complete triumph of the 'tragic irony' school of *Beowulf* criticism²⁷ that by 1943 Charles W. Kennedy, in his survey of Old English poetry, could assure his readers that the lot of the peaceweaver was generally a tragic one. Writing of *Wulf and Eadwacer*, he observed that 'To a woman whose noble blood ordained an inter-tribal function as "peace-weaver," fate often brought such tragic confrontations'—prime examples being Freawaru and Hildeburh.²⁸ And there matters largely rested, the peaceweaver being mentioned regularly, if not often, by writers who had little new to say, until Jane Chance's *Woman as Hero in Old English Literature* (1986) reformulated the idea and made it popular again.

It is probably fair to count *Woman as Hero* among the most influential works of Old English literary criticism of the last three decades.

²⁶ *Beowulf and Epic Tradition*, p. 114.

²⁷ For a fine account of the development of this now-dominant mode of interpretation, see Shippey and Haarder, *Beowulf: The Critical Heritage*, pp. 62–7. A notable instance is Schücking, *Heldenstolz und Würde*, pp. 41–2. For Schücking, approaching dynastic struggles, which the poet hints at, make Wealhtheow's speech expressing confidence that harmony and goodwill will continue in the hall 'ein Stück tragischer Ironie', an instance of tragic irony (see further below, pp. 141–2).

²⁸ *Earliest English Poetry*, pp. 51–2. Chance, *Woman as Hero*, pp. 88–9, also identifies the speaker of *Wulf and Eadwacer* as a 'failed peace-weaver'. Jamison, 'Traffic of Women', identifies the speakers of *Wulf and Eadwacer* and *The Wife's Lament* and various women in *Beowulf* and *Völsunga Saga* as 'peace-pledges'. All Old English examples aside from that of Freawaru are based on various kinds of inference. Andrew Welsh, 'Beowulf, Branwen and the Tragic Peaceweaver Tale', calls Branwen of 'Branwen Daughter of Llŷr' a peaceweaver, but that tale conveys no hint that her marriage is meant to make peace; rather, it is 'to ally the Island of the Mighty [Britain] with Ireland so that both will be stronger' (Gantz, *The Mabinogion*, p. 68). Cherewatuk, 'Germanic Echoes in Latin Verse', calls Rade Gund a peaceweaver, but she would be more accurately described as spoils of war.

Despite reviews that ranged from lukewarm to hostile,²⁹ the book (along with Chance's preliminary studies³⁰), has been almost universally read and widely cited. One reason for the book's success is surely its position in the scholarly discourse—as the first major work of Old English feminist criticism³¹ at a time when such scholarship was long overdue, it moved the conversation about women well beyond the simple stereotypes where it had long been stuck. In addition, the book possessed qualities that some reviewers may not have been attuned to: it is accessible and compellingly written, and much of its argument is organized around the immensely attractive figure of the peaceweaver.

Chance's peaceweaver is descended from the Victorian ideal, but not identical with it. According to Chance, peacemaking was essential to the Anglo-Saxon ideal of aristocratic womanhood: a queen promoted peace through her gracious behaviour, her wise counsels, her generosity and her ritual function of carrying the mead cup. But her 'chief role was to effect peace between two tribes through marriage and children' (p. 3), 'making peace between two tribes by literally mingling their blood' (p. 1). Hers was a 'passive' role (p. 7), unlike that of the striving Victorian figure, and her reward for performing the role well was doom and tragedy, weeping and suffering (p. 10), for peace was a vain hope in this warrior society. Appropriately, one of Chance's most notable contributions to the critical

²⁹ See the reviews by Frantzen, Brewer, O'Donoghue and Weissman. Overing, *Language, Sign, and Gender*, pp. 48–50, though not a review, has worthwhile remarks on the book.

³⁰ Chance (Nitzsche), 'Anglo-Saxon Woman as Hero', 'Structural Unity'; the second of these was reprinted in Donoghue, *Beowulf: A Verse Translation*, pp. 152–67, where a great many students encounter it.

³¹ Christine Fell's *Women in Anglo-Saxon England* has also been described as feminist (see Enright, *Lady with a Mead Cup*, p. 22 n. 68: 'Christine Fell . . . offers many improbable feminist readings with regard to female status'). Fell's book is not a work of literary criticism, but it is a sign of the rising interest in women among Anglo-Saxonists of the mid-1980s. Damico, *Beowulf's Wealhtheow and the Valkyrie Tradition*, might also be regarded as feminist criticism in that it is about a woman, but as pointed out in a review by Joseph Harris (pp. 400–3), this work is most comparable to the mythologizing studies of the mid-twentieth century and with the work of such scholars as Kemp Malone and Francis P. Magoun. My own intemperate review of this book is better left uncited.

discourse is the phrase 'failed peaceweaver', which has been adopted by a number of critics.³²

A casual reading of Chance's first chapter, liberally supplied with quotations of primary texts, gives the impression that the peaceweaver is a well documented figure in Anglo-Saxon sources. A reader might easily miss the fact that *freoðuwebbe* never appears in a context having to do with marriage or with peacemaking, and that the sources have little to say about women's role in peacemaking.

The effect on criticism of the peaceweaver (I am not talking only about Chance) has been pernicious. Non-specialists can use the idea to reduce the women of Anglo-Saxon England to cartoon figures. For example, here is how Theresa D. Kemp, in *Women in the Age of Shakespeare*, describes Anglo-Saxon women:

Anglo-Saxon literature, such as *Beowulf* and the elegiac poems of the period, presents either idealized or grossly vilified images of women. Women are praised according to their success at performing their roles as consort to the ring-giver, hostess in the mead hall, and as peace-weaver among tribes; in the antithesis, they are demonized and rendered literal monsters, such as Grendel's mother in *Beowulf*. (p. 13)

Papers of undergraduates who have read Chance's study (or the first few pages of it) often display this kind of naïveté. As Chance's own work has amply shown, the lives of women, even the fictional ones of heroic poetry, cannot easily be summed up in such platitudes. But those who are interested in dismissing the early Middle Ages as unworthy of serious thought find a useful concept in the peaceweaver.

The idea of the peaceweaver can lead even accomplished medievalists in strange directions. For example, Karen Cherewatuk, in the midst of a thought-provoking article on Germanic elements in *De excidio Thuringiae*, states that 'Like Hildeburh, Radegund is a failed peaceweaver, for she was unable to prevent her husband from murdering her brother' (p. 11). In

³² Overing, *Language, Sign, and Gender*, p. 87; Hollis, *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church*, p. 192 (see below); Cherewatuk, 'Germanic Echoes in Latin Verse', p. 11 (see below); Bennett, 'Exile and the Semiosis of Gender', p. 45; Frank, 'Quid Hiniældus cum feminis', p. 20; Klein, *Ruling Women*, p. 104; Gwara, *Heroic Identity*, p. 150.

Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church, Stephanie Hollis makes a similar point about Osthryth, who 'in Bede's account of the outbreak of hostilities between Northumbria and Mercia, can be regarded as a failed peaceweaver, whose efforts to forge peace proved tragically inadequate to the force of male vengeance and aggression', whom Bede may indeed have implicitly criticized as having been responsible for 'further violence and bloodshed' (p. 162). But surely such statements out-Ruskin Ruskin. There is something perverse about a theory that induces us to blame a woman whenever one of her kinsmen kills another. Radegund's words of self-recrimination are hopelessly vague: she was responsible for her (younger?) brother's well being, and so she feels responsible for his death, but her greater sorrow is that, separated from him, she has been unable to mourn properly.³³ For Osthryth we have even less: no hint at all that she ever attempted to make peace or that Bede thought it her responsibility to do so. These are peaceweaver narratives only if we define 'peaceweaver' so broadly as to make the concept unusable.

Or consider another pair of statements concerning peaceweavers. In 'Wicked Queens' Tom Shippey writes, in connection with the Freawaru episode, 'one could argue that the successful strategy for Hrothgar might have been not to waste Freawaru on a foreign and less immediate threat, by having her marry a stranger, but to have her defuse a closer threat by marrying her first cousin Hrothulf.' Alaric Hall, 'Hygelac's Only Daughter', quotes Shippey's statement approvingly (p. 87) and argues vigorously that Higelac's gift of his only daughter to Eofor as a reward for killing the Swedish king Ongentheow demonstrates his lack of *hige*: he should have married her off to a Swede and thereby made peace. The implicit suggestion here is that if one has a single daughter on hand one can easily and simply exchange her for peace. If that were true, the early Middle Ages would be remembered as a much less violent time—and one with many more daughters about as well. Peace is harder to achieve than that. One of the things that strikes one forcibly on reading Paul Kershaw's *Peaceful Kings*

³³ *De excidio Thuringiae* 145–6: *impia, crede, tua rea sum, germane, saluti, / mors cui sola fui, nulla sepulchra dedi* 'believe me, brother, I, undutiful, am responsible for your well-being, [and though] I alone have been your death, I have given you no tomb' (F. Leo, *Venanti opera poetica*, p. 274).

is how little headway the well documented yearning for peace among early medieval kings and their subjects could make against the forces that drove nations to war. Heroic poets were well aware of this: the *Beowulf* poet, especially, understands both the yearning for peace and the difficulty of bringing it about (see above, p. 19, and Chapter Six below). Even now, in our relatively quiet age, we can easily see that there is no price tag on peace reading ‘one daughter’, no simple formula for achieving it.

An even more pernicious effect of the peaceweaver idea than the simplistic readings it encourages is the way it blocks serious thinking about the relationship of women to violence and peacemaking in literature and history. If the answer to the question ‘what do women have to do with violence in Anglo-Saxon England?’ is always ‘the good ones try to prevent it’, then we will look no farther; and we will also have a difficult time fitting Wealhtheow, Hildeburh, Freawaru and Thryth—not to mention such historical figures as Offa’s daughter Eadburh, Æthelræd’s mother Ælfthryth and Æthelflæd of Mercia—into a European cultural picture that also includes Gregory of Tours’s Fredegund and Brunhild, *Njáls Saga*’s Hallgerð, and *Laxdæla Saga*’s Guðrún.

When men of the nineteenth century spoke of the beauty of the word *freoðuwebbe*, they were responding to an image of their own desire, and each succeeding age has adapted this figure to mirror its own desires. A Google search on the term ‘peaceweaver’ yields ‘About 53,000 results’,³⁴ leading us not only to scholarly volumes and articles,³⁵ but also to several novels having ‘Peaceweaver’ in the title,³⁶ an intentional community of peace activists

³⁴ <http://www.google.com>, accessed 13 Sept. 2011 (as were the websites cited below).

³⁵ L. T. Shank and J. A. Nichols, eds., *Medieval Religious Women: Peaceweavers* (1987); Kathleen Herbert, *Peace-weavers and Shield-Maidens: Women in Early English Society* (1997). Of course there have been numerous articles concerning peaceweavers, some of them referred to in this chapter.

³⁶ Julia Jarman, *Peace Weavers* (2006); Judith Arnoopp, *Peaceweaver* (2009); Christopher Steed, *The Peace Weaver* (2009); Tracey Warr, *Almodis: The Peaceweaver* (2011); Rebecca Barnhouse, *Peaceweaver* (2012).

and associated organic farm,³⁷ a fibre artist and musician,³⁸ a jam band,³⁹ an organization of peace advocates on the island of Mindanao,⁴⁰ a teacher of erotic tantric yoga,⁴¹ a homeopathic healer,⁴² a Wiccan priestess,⁴³ a yogic performer/healer and New Earth priestess,⁴⁴ and the marketers of a collection of jewellery,⁴⁵ to name only a few. The association of the peaceweaver with peace activism, organic agriculture, feminist neopaganism and other New Age practices and beliefs is remarkable chiefly for its contrast with the conservative ideas espoused by the men who invented the figure. Such an adaptable fiction is likely to be with us for a long time.

Of peace, queens and angels

The explanation of *freoðuwebbe* and related words offered in the following pages will not be nearly as attractive as the one devised by Ettmüller and developed further by those who came after him. If that explanation has led us to a simplistic understanding of gender roles in Anglo-Saxon England (men made war, women peace—a clean division of labour!) it may seem to many ample compensation that it has for so long answered the cultural expectations and desires of so many readers. An explanation that instead fits the patchy evidence of the primary texts will inevitably be incomplete,

³⁷ <http://peaceweavers.com/>; <http://www.localharvest.org/peaceweaver-organic-farm-M16964>.

³⁸ Peace Weaver (surnamed Weaver, she changed her first name to 'Peace'); see <http://peaceweaver.com>; <http://www.etsy.com/shop/peaceweaver>.

³⁹ The Peaceweaver Jam Band, many of whose performances can be accessed online; for some notes, see <http://summerpeacegathering.blogspot.com/>.

⁴⁰ <http://www.mindanaopeaceweavers.org/>; they confer the 'Peace Weaver Award' on persons and organizations that promote peace in the Philippines, and also the 'Young Peace Weaver Award' on young people who work for peace.

⁴¹ Goddess Ocean; her website is <http://www.peaceweaver.net/welcome.html> (not workplace-safe).

⁴² Kate McBride, <http://www.peaceweaverhealing.co.uk/>.

⁴³ K. Peaceweaver, <http://wftacademyofpaganstudies.webs.com/newdedicantshps.htm>.

⁴⁴ Samantha Beers, <http://wholebodywisdom.com/bio/index.htm>.

⁴⁵ Bamboo Trading Company: http://www.salesproducersinc.com/index/bamboo_peaceweaver.

like the evidence itself; it will not come wrapped in a narrative, tragic or otherwise; it is unlikely to fit neatly with our own notions about femininity, past or present; its truth will not be obvious. It will, however, move us towards our goal of understanding the place of women, especially queens, in the heroic economy of *Beowulf*.

Peace is a complex concept. In John 14:27 Christ says to his disciples, *pacem relinquo vobis, pacem meam do vobis* 'peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you'; Augustine, noting the absence of *meam* 'my' in the first clause and its presence in the second, thinks that Christ may be talking about two different kinds of peace: *pax uero ista quam nobis relinquit in hoc saeculo, nostra est potius dicenda quam ipsius* 'that peace which he leaves to us in this world ought to be called ours rather than his'.⁴⁶ We are constantly at war within ourselves and never in complete agreement among ourselves; what passes for peace with us is very different from God's perfect peace, which he will someday give to the faithful. Similarly, the temporary and imperfect peace that rulers are able to achieve in their territories or with their neighbours differs from the eternal peace of heaven.⁴⁷

The Old English vocabulary of peace is various along another axis. That the most common words in this semantic field, *sibb* and *frið*, are not synonyms is demonstrated by the fact that *sibb* is overwhelmingly more common than *frið* as a gloss for Latin *pax*.⁴⁸ *Sibb* belongs to a family of words having do with kinship; used of those who are not kin, it denotes the presence of good feelings similar to the love between family members. *Frið*, on the other hand, belongs to the same family of words as *frēo* 'free' and *frēond* 'friend' and has to do with friendship but rarely kinship; it relates to good relations within and between nations, peace agreements, protection (for example, a king protecting his people), immunity and sanctuary. It is much more likely than *sibb* to be used as a legalism. The list of headers

⁴⁶ Willems, *In Iohannis euangelium tractatus*, lxxvii.4.

⁴⁷ For Augustine's views on 'the limits of earthly peace', see Kershaw, *Peaceful Kings*, pp. 64–8.

⁴⁸ The statement is based on proximity searches on *frið*, *friþ* against *pax*, *pacem*, *pacis*, *pace* in the *Dictionary of Old English Corpus*.

that comes up for searches on *sibb* and *frið* in the *Thesaurus of Old English*⁴⁹ is instructive (Table 1; the order apparently not significant).

<i>sibb</i>	<i>frið</i>
Kinship, relationship	Peace, tranquillity
Spiritual relationships	Peace, state of law and order
Absence of movement, stillness	Peace (not war)
Freedom from trouble, comfort, security	Cessation of hostilities
Friendliness, affection	Sanctuary
Friendly, amiable	Outlawry
Peace, tranquillity	Church peace, right of sanctuary
Peace (not war)	
Law, custom, covenant	
Baptism, baptizing (and anointing)	

Table 1: Search results for *sibb* and *frið* in *The Old English Thesaurus*: these are headers for word-groups.

As *frið* and *sibb* are related in meaning and assonate pleasantly, it is no surprise to find them together in collocations. Best known of these is the compound noun *friðusibb*, used of Wealhtheow and usually glossed ‘pledge of peace’,⁵⁰ though neither *frið* nor *sibb* means ‘pledge’: the standard definition simply echoes the Victorian narrative concerning *freoðuwebbe*, with about as much evidence to back it up. But the words also occur together in phrases, as in the Old English Orosius: *sipþan Crist geboren was þe ealles middangeardes is sibb ond frið* ‘after Christ was born, who is all the world’s *sibb* and *frið*’.⁵¹ The Orosius also relates how *eall þeos worold gecēas Agustuses frið ond his sibbe* ‘all the world chose Augustus’s *frið* and *sibb*’ (132.8—both *frið* and *sibb* translating Latin *pax*), how there was *sibb ond friþ* over all the world during his reign (59.12), and how during the reign of Marcus

⁴⁹ <http://libra.englant.arts.gla.ac.uk/oethesaurus/>, accessed 10 Oct. 2011.

⁵⁰ E.g. Mitchell and Robinson, *Beowulf*; Fulk, Bjork, and Niles, *Klaeber’s Beowulf*; DOE.

⁵¹ Bately, *The Old English Orosius*, 31.16–17. It is not expressed in quite this way in the Latin text: *beneficio Christianae religionis, quae cognatam per omnes populos fidem iungit* ‘the benefit of the Christian religion, which joins all people in a common faith’. cf. Ephesians 2:14: *Ipse enim est pax nostra, qui fecit utraque unum* ‘For he is our peace, who hath made both one’.

Aurelius and his brother Christians enjoyed *frīð ond sibbe* (141.20). A similar phrase occurs in the Old English Bede, which relates how Eanfrith of Bernicia went to Cadwallon to beg *sibbe ond frīðes* accompanied by only twelve men—an unwise journey with death at its end.⁵²

Both *sibb* and *frīð* are frequently used, sometimes together, in religious texts, with senses apparently analogous to those they have in other contexts. In *Christ III* (the Judgment) God addresses his chosen:

Ʒār hē fore englum ond fore elþeodum
tō þām ēadgestum ærest mæðleð,
ond him swæslice sibbe gehāteð,
heofona hēahcýning; hālgan reorde
frēfreð hē fægre ond him friþ bēodeð,
hāteð hý gesunde ond gesēnade
on ēþel faran engla drēames,
ond þæs tō wīdan fēore willum nēotan. (1336–43)

There before the angels and all the peoples
the high king of heaven will first address
the most blessed and kindly promise them peace (*sibb*);
with his holy voice he will gently
comfort them and offer them peace (*frīð*),
bid them, whole and blessed,
journey to the land of the angels' joy
and then take their pleasure for ever and ever.

The use of both *sibb* and *frīð* in this passage is like the collocations discussed above in that the two words together express the *sibb ond frīð* of God—both peace among those who are kindred because Christian, as among nations in the Orosius, and the perfect divine peace that Augustine wrote of. Additionally, the *sibb* of heaven may be understood as the kinship of angels and the saved, who in heaven will acquire the nature of angels⁵³—a point echoed by the poet of *Christ II* (the Ascension):

⁵² T. Miller, *Old English Version*, i. 154.

⁵³ See Keck, *Angels & Angelology*, pp. 26–7, who cites Matthew 22:30, *In resurrectione enim neque nubent neque nubentur, sed erunt sicut angeli Dei in caelo* 'For in the resurrection they shall neither marry nor be married; but shall be as the angels of God in heaven', and Augustine, *De ciuitate dei* xxii.1.

Sib sceal gemæne
 englum ond ældum ā forð heonan
 wesan wīdeferh. (581–3; cf. 689–90)

There will be kinship
 between angels and men forever
 from then on.

The *frið* of heaven is refuge from discord—Augustine writes at the end of *De ciuitate dei* that in heaven is *uera pax, ubi nihil aduersi nec a se ipso nec ab aliquo quisque patietur* ‘true peace, where one will suffer no opposition from oneself or from any other’.⁵⁴ It is likewise refuge from violent conflict: Ælfric in his *Passio S. Thome* writes that Christ *hylt his fæder rīce on hēalicum muntum, þær nān fēond ne cymð þe his frið āwyrde* ‘holds his father’s kingdom in the high mountains, where no enemy comes to disturb his peace’.⁵⁵ Angels are associated with this heavenly *frið* in their role as wielders of God’s power, and our *friðo*- compounds express this association: they are implementors of heavenly peace (*friðuwebba*), guardians of it (*friðuweard*) and servants of it (*friðuscealc*).

The primary meanings of *sibb* and *frið* have to do not with the presence or absence of hostilities,⁵⁶ but rather with the quality of human relationships: in the former case those among family members and in the latter those between friends or between rulers and their subjects. Both words connote *good* relationships: loving families, faithful friends, good rulers, loyal allies. Used together they describe the very best of these: rulers like the peaceful Augustus (see above, p. 25), queens like the gracious and generous Wealhtheow, God, his heaven and his angels. In the one instance where the collocation is used in a context critical of a ruler, the intention is plainly ironic, conveying Eanfrith’s naïveté in thinking that *sibb ond frið* could be obtained from the infamously savage Cadwallon.

The meaning of our *sibb/frið* collocations is found at the intersection of early medieval ideas concerning divine authority and good rulership—the one ultimately modelled on the other and each promoting harmony and

⁵⁴ Dombart and Kalb, ii. 631.

⁵⁵ Skeat, *Ælfric’s Lives of Saints*, xxxvi.82–3

⁵⁶ Closer to this sense is *stilnes* ‘quiet, peace’.

good feeling. Peace as the absence of violent hostility is a desirable side effect of such good rulership. I suspect that the meaning of *freoðuwebbe* as used of queens is similarly located, and that—though a precise definition (beyond literal translation of the word's elements) may prove elusive—it has to do with her well documented role in promoting both the material and the spiritual welfare of the polity.

Leaving aside the queens of *Beowulf* (who are at issue here), the traditional entry-point for understanding queens in Anglo-Saxon England is *Maxims I*:

Cyning sceal mid cēape cwēne gebicgan,
 bunum ond bēagum; bū sceolon ārest
 geofum gōd wesan. Gūð sceal in eorle,
 wīg geweaxan, ond wīf geþēon
 lēof mid hyre lēodum, lēohtmod wesan,
 rūne healdan, rūmheort bēon
 mēarum ond māþmum, meodorādenne
 for gesiðmægen symle āghwær
 eodor æþelinga ārest gegrētan,
 forman fulle tō frēan hond
 ricene gerācan, ond him rād witan
 boldāgendum bām ætsomne. (81–92)

A king must buy a queen for a price,
 with cups and rings; both must first
 be liberal with gifts. War and battle
 must flourish in the man, and the woman must prosper
 beloved with her people, be cheerful,
 keep confidences, be generous
 with horses and treasures, in the mead-assembly
 always and everywhere before the troop of retainers
 first greet the protector of nobles,
 quickly deliver the first cup
 to her lord's hand, and know what is wise
 for the two rulers of the hall together.

This is, as Christine Fell observed, a 'male-centred' view of the queen's

role.⁵⁷ It is also mead-hall centred, having everything to do with good relations among the king and his retainers and nothing to do with foreign relations. The *Maxims I* poet likes a queen who is cheerful, generous, wise and prudent (qualities that would surely make her *lēof* ‘beloved’) and who performs well the ceremony with the mead cup (especially remembering to offer it first to her husband—one wonders how often queens forgot this bit). And even if she has been purchased with cups and rings, she possesses a certain amount of authority: she and the king are joint *boldāgend* ‘owners of the hall’. A division of labour is implied—warfare is a man’s business while a queen’s role is to be lovable and wise—but there is no mention of a responsibility to keep the peace.

The ideas of Sedulius Scottus, an Irishman writing for a Frankish court, overlap with those of the Old English poet:

Gloria regnantis proba moribus eminet uxor,
 Sicut honesta uinea.
 Illam nobilitas triplici uirtute uenustet
 Rosis pudici pectoris.
 Lactea formoso niteant si colla decore,
 Magis nitescat castitas.
 Christus ut Ecclesiam sibi casto iunxit amore,
 Uxor uiro sic haereat;
 Mitis simplicitas in cuius mente redundet
 Velut columbae gratia.
 Quam decoret pietas, prudentia, sacra potestas,
 Esther ut alma floruit.
 Vincula pacis ament rex et regina; duobus
 Sit foedus et concordia.
 Inuida non dirimat geminos discordia pacis
 Quos lex superna iunxerat.

A wife honest in morals stands out as a ruler’s glory
 Like an upright vine.
 Let nobility in threefold virtue beautify her
 With the roses of a modest breast.

⁵⁷ *Women in Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 36.

If milk-white necks shine with a handsome beauty,
 Let chastity shine the more.
 As Christ united the Church to Him with chaste love,
 Let a wife cleave to a man;
 Let gentle simplicity overflow in her mind
 Like the grace of a dove;
 Let godliness, prudence and holy power adorn her
 As gentle Esther flowered.
 Let the king and queen love the bonds of peace; in both
 Let there be amity and concord.
 Let envious discord not divide the pair
 Whom the supernal law of peace has joined.⁵⁸

There is talk of peace here, but it is directed at both king and queen, and the context suggests that the poet is chiefly concerned with marital harmony. The queen should be beautified by manifold virtues; she should be to her husband as the Church (always to be understood as the body of the faithful, not a building or institution) is to Christ. Sedulius's model for successful queenship is Esther, who by offering prudent advice to King Ahasuerus brought about the execution of the evil counsellor Haman, the deliverance of the Jews of Persia and the slaughter of tens of thousands of their enemies.

Esther comes up, together with other biblical women, in the *ordo* compiled in 856 by archbishop Hincmar of Reims for the marriage of the twelve-year-old Frankish princess Judith to King Æthelwulf and her coronation as queen of the West Saxons:⁵⁹

Despondeo te uni uiro uirginem castam, atque pudicam futuram coniugem, ut sanctae mulieres fuere uiris suis, Sarra, Rebecca, Rachel, Hester, Iudith, Anna, Noemi, fauente auctore et sanctificatore nuptiarum, Iesu Christo domino nostro, qui uiuit et regnat in saecula saeculorum.

I give to you as sole husband this pure virgin and chaste spouse-to-be, as the holy wives Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, Esther, Judith, Anna and Naomi were

⁵⁸ Dyson, *Sedulius De rectoribus*, pp. 80–3.

⁵⁹ Jackson, *Ordines coronationis Franciae*, i. 73–9. The text has often been discussed; see especially Nelson, 'Early Medieval Rites of Queen-Making', 'The Earliest Royal Ordo', and Smith, 'The Earliest Queen-Making Rites', pp. 23–7.

given to their husbands, with the favour of the originator and sanctifier of marriages, our lord Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns forever.

Julie Ann Smith calls these women 'Old Testament models of good wives',⁶⁰ and so they are, but they can be read more specifically as enumerating the desirable qualities of both wives and queens: Sarah as matriarch and princess of all nations, Rebecca as patience, Rachel as grace, Anna and Naomi as chastity and virtuous mourning in widowhood.⁶¹ Esther and Judith both come up again in the *ordo*, in the prayer that accompanies the anointment:

. . . qui hoc etiam unguento famulae tuae Judith ad liberationem seruorum tuorum, et confusionem inimicorum, uultum exhilarasti, et ancillae tuae Hester faciem hac spiritali misericordiae tuae unctione adeo lucifluam reddidisti, ut efferatum cor regis ad misericordiam, et saluationem in te credentium, ipsius precibus inclinares.

. . . who indeed with this oil refreshed the face of your handmaid Judith for the liberation of your servants and the destruction of their enemies; and who rendered the face of your servant Esther exceedingly brilliant with the spiritual anointing of your mercy so that you might by her entreaties incline the king's savage heart towards mercy and the salvation of those who believe in you.

The *ordo* speaks of peace—the queen should be *columbae pace* . . . *decoram* 'adorned with the peace of the dove'—but this sentiment is not gender-specific, being present also in the 'first *ordo*' for the coronation of a king, the Anglo-Saxon text that provided much of Hincmar's material.⁶² And

⁶⁰ 'The Earliest Queen-Making Rites', p. 25.

⁶¹ For example: for Sarah and Rebecca see Isidore, *Etymologies* VII.vi.29, 35; for Rachel, Ambrose, *De Abraham* i.5 (Schenkl, *Sancti Ambrosii opera pars prima*, p. 529); for Anna and Naomi, Ambrose, *De uiduis* iv, vi (*PL* xvi.241–2, 244–5). Interestingly, Goscelin of St-Bertin compares St Eormenhild as secular queen to Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Elizabeth; after the end of her marriage she is comparable rather to the more bellicose Judith (whose slaying of Holofernes is figured as the defeat of lust), Jael and Deborah (Love, *Goscelin of Saint-Bertin*, 18–19). He compares Seaxburh, sister of St Æthelthryth, to Judith and Esther (*ibid.* pp. 136–7, 140–1).

⁶² N. Orchard, *The Leofric Missal*, no. 2460.

in any case the preferred sort of peace is that which follows the utter destruction of enemies, like those so satisfyingly dispatched in the books of Esther and Judith. This is the peace that God promises his faithful in Leviticus 26:6–9, evidently a favourite reading among both Anglo-Saxons and Franks as it is quoted by Sedulius (above, p. 26) and included in coronation masses for kings.⁶³

Esther and Judith make regular appearances, in coronation rituals and elsewhere, as models for queens.⁶⁴ Ælfric wrote homilies about both. For Judith he supplied the standard interpretation, that she is a type of the Church (see above, p. 47); his homily on Esther is strictly narrative,⁶⁵ but for her too there was a standard interpretation—that she was a type of the Church, like Judith, and a bride of Christ (Ahasuerus, though imperfect, being a type of Christ).⁶⁶ For that matter, the Queen of Sheba, who came from afar to admire the magnificence and wisdom of Solomon, was interpreted the same way.⁶⁷

From all of this it would appear that *any* queen could be seen as a type of the Church, cleaving to her husband as the faithful do to Christ. I am not working up to an allegorical reading of the queens of *Beowulf*, but I would suggest that this cluster of ideas—the queen as beautiful, cheerful, virtuous, chaste and pious, and as standing in relation to the king much as the Church does to Christ—is deeply embedded in early medieval thinking about queenship, so that a queen like Wealhtheow, making her stately entrance into the royal hall, must necessarily evoke the whole package.

The queen holds real power. While she does not go into battle, she is expected to contribute, like Esther and Judith, to her nation's victories

⁶³ Banting, *Two Anglo-Saxon Pontificals*, p. 109; Doble, *Pontificale Lanaletense*, pp. 59–60.

⁶⁴ E.g. Legg, *English Coronation Records*, pp. 37, 110, 266 (the last of these for the coronation of Mary, queen of Charles I, in 1626).

⁶⁵ Assmann, *Angelsächsische Homilien und Heiligenleben*, pp. 92–101.

⁶⁶ See Hrabanus Maurus, *Expositio in librum Esther* (PL cix. 637); for comment see Vrudny, 'Medieval Fascination with the Queen'.

⁶⁷ Ælfric, *In dedicatione ecclesiae* (Godden, *Catholic Homilies II*, 339–42); for Ælfric's sources see Godden, *Ælfric's Catholic Homilies: Introduction*, pp. 665–7. The identification of Judith and Esther as types of the Church is evidently quite old: see e.g. Jerome, *In Sophoniam prophetam* (PL xxv.1337), which compares the ladies to whom the commentary is addressed to Judith and Esther *in typo Ecclesiae*.

in her own way. The *ordines* for the coronation of queens recognize her temporal power through formulae and biblical exempla⁶⁸ and her spiritual power by their admonitions to both queen and king to combat heresy and convert the heathen.⁶⁹ Yet as wielder of power she remains an auxiliary figure: while the king's authority is from God, hers is from the king—so these sources would seem to be saying.⁷⁰

Angels, too, are auxiliary figures, wielding God's power and not their own. And as marriage in the Middle Ages is conceptualized more as hierarchy than partnership, with woman as *adiutorium* 'a help' for man (Genesis 2:18), so women stand in relation to their husbands much as angels do to God. A queen, being figuratively *sponsa Christi*, also stands in relation to God much as the angels do. I have found no single passage that would place beyond doubt the relationship I am positing between queens and angels, but neither is there a single passage that can explain the extraordinarily active role of Anglo-Saxon queens in advancing the Church in the seventh century and later or the surprising number of queens who came to be venerated as saints.⁷¹

In this connection it is worth a glance at Bede's marvelous *tour de force* of serpentine verse in praise of St Æthelthryth (*HE* iv.20), which brings together several ideas around the figure of the virgin queen. It begins with an inversion of the conventional epic opening: the poet calls on God, not the muses; he sings not of war but of the gift of peace, not of *fedra Helena* 'filthy Helen' but of chastity. By manipulating epic convention in this way he claims epic significance for his subject, shoving aside the greatest of all women of epic, an exemplar of queenship, and putting in her place Æthelthryth, exemplar of quite a different understanding of queenship. Both women are queens, but Æthelthryth is numbered with the virgin

⁶⁸ See Smith, 'The Earliest Queen-Making Rites', p. 26; Nelson, 'Early Medieval Rites of Queen-Making', p. 305

⁶⁹ E.g. H. A. Wilson, *The Benedictional of Archbishop Robert*, pp. 144, 148; Ward, 'An Early Version of the Anglo-Saxon Coronation Ceremony', pp. 354, 358; Doble, *Pontificale Lanaletense*, p. 41.

⁷⁰ Smith, 'The Earliest Queen-Making Rites', citing K. F. Morrison, *The Two Kingdoms* (1964). See below for doubts.

⁷¹ Well chronicled in Ridyard, *Royal Saints*.

martyrs and the virgin Mary. Having rejected earthly marriage (or rather, like Cecilia, remained pure within marriage), she becomes the bride of Christ and perhaps (*forsitan*) his mother as well, like Mary, in whose womb, as St Proclus wrote, was woven the incarnation.⁷² Having reigned as worldly queen, Æthelthryth reigns, like Mary, as queen in heaven, her heavenly status analogous to, but much greater than, her status on earth:

Percipit inde decus reginae et sceptrum sub astris;
plus super astra manens percipit inde decus.

She receives the dignity and sceptre of queenship beneath the stars;
even more, dwelling above the stars, does she receive of dignity.⁷³

The repetition of present indicative *percipit*, though forced by the verse form, nevertheless seems meaningful, as if Æthelthryth's reign were simultaneously earthly and heavenly. What is the source of the queen's authority when she rejects sexual relations with the king, becoming instead the bride of Christ? Or in the more common and less extreme case, what is its source when she comes to be revered as exceptionally pious? A queen who lives up to the ideals articulated in *Maxims I*, the coronation *ordines* and the other sources cited here might be understood as already reigning in heaven as well as on earth, her authority coming not solely from her husband but also, like that of the angels, from God. Even a king must be in awe of such authority, as the *Liber Eliensis* would later claim that the rejected husband Ecgfrith was:

⁷² According to a sermon by St Proclus (cited in Chance, *Woman as Hero*, pp. 78–9): see the translation in Constas, *Proclus of Constantinople*, p. 137: 'the awesome loom of the divine economy upon which the robe of union was ineffably woven. The loom-worker was the Holy Spirit; the wool-worker the overshadowing power from on high. The wool was the ancient fleece of Adam; the interlocking thread the spotless flesh of the Virgin. The weaver's shuttle was propelled by the immeasurable grace of him who wore the robe; the artisan was the Word who entered in through her sense of hearing'. This was adapted by an anonymous Latin homilist (see *PL* lvi. 1140—the homily has been falsely attributed to Leo I). It is not impossible that Proclus's sermon was known in Anglo-Saxon England, and the resemblance of the virgin Empress Pulcheria, who may have inspired the sermon, to Æthelthryth is almost eerie (see *ibid.* pp. 134–5).

⁷³ My translation. Cf. Colgrave and Mynors, *Bede's Ecclesiastical History*: 'Proud is she, queening it on earthly throne; / In heaven established far more proud is she.'

Rex inquam uirtute celitus, ut credi fas est, aliqua correptus in se territus stupuit, reginam beatissimam inpudice non tetigit neque contristauit nec quicquam molestie intulit, quam non ut reginam aut parem uerum tanquam dominam per omnia uenerabatur.

The king, I say, restraining himself by some heaven-sent power[, as we may well believe,] was stupefied in terror, and did not touch the most blessed queen in an unchaste manner, nor cause her misery nor inflict any harassment on her, and he revered her in all respects, not as his queen or his consort but as ruler over him.⁷⁴

Human beings differ from angels in possessing free will.⁷⁵ Angels are, in this sense, like the imaginary woman whom nineteenth-century men so desired: ‘forgetting self alone’, she ‘never’ (as Virginia Woolf wrote of the model woman of *Angel in the House*) ‘had a mind or a wish of her own’.⁷⁶ But people in reality (as opposed to imagination) cannot easily be deprived of will, wish, mind and self. The early medieval queen, though bought with rings and cups, given away in marriage and assigned an auxiliary role in the kingdom, could not so resemble the angels as to be without these things. In both history and *Beowulf*, we see her use whatever resources and power she has to get what she wants—and the men do not always object.

⁷⁴ Blake, *Liber Eliensis*, p. 23; Fairweather, *Liber Eliensis*, p. 28 (but the translation of *ut credi fas est* is mine). See also Blanton, *Signs of Devotion*, pp. 146–71 for a fine discussion of Æthelthryth’s power as queen and saint. On the relationship between temporal and religious power in Anglo-Saxon and Frankish contexts, see Thielliet, ‘Radegonde et Etheldrède’.

⁷⁵ Keck, *Angels & Angelology*, p. 24 explains the Augustinian position: ‘Those angels who did not fall, instead turned toward God and were forever confirmed in their glory by the grace of God. . . . The free will of the good angels is completed and perfected by their confirmation by grace, as they have been transformed from a state of sinlessness to a state of perfection.’

⁷⁶ ‘She was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily. If there was chicken, she took the leg; if there was a draught she sat in it—in short she was so constituted that she never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others’ (‘Professions for Women’, p. 237).

CHAPTER FIVE

Three Queens

THE PRECEDING CHAPTER should be understood not as seeking to replace one controlling narrative with another, but rather as offering an interpretation of several not-very-common compound nouns used of queens and angels in Old English poetry. It is no easier to generalize about the women of *Beowulf* and Anglo-Saxon England than it is about those of any place or time, and it is especially unwise to do so on the basis of words that occur so rarely.

In *Beowulf's Wealhtheow and the Valkyrie Tradition*, Helen Damico looks at Wealhtheow's epithet *friðusibb* in light of a statement by the early twentieth-century Danish scholar Vilhelm Grønbech:

Rather than denoting a 'laying down of arms,' *frið*, Grønbech notes, 'indicates something armed, protection, defense—or else a power for peace which keeps men amicably inclined. Even when we find mention, in the Germanic of "making peace," the fundamental idea is not that of removing disturbing elements and letting things settle down, but that of introducing a peace-power among the disputants.' A character who is *friðusibb*, then, would exemplify a state of peace marked by vigilant activity and a security brought about by action that has been armed and may again become armed.¹

Grønbech's work now seems unfortunate in its pietistic racialism and its glorification of vengeance;² but his view of *frið* is not entirely incompat-

¹ Damico, *Beowulf's Wealhtheow and the Valkyrie Tradition*, p. 85.

² *The Culture of the Teutons* appears now to appeal more to neopagans than to scholars. My copy is an electronic reprint issued by 'Jotun's Bane Kindred', a heathen group in Liberty, Missouri; it is sold through Apple's iTunes store.

ible with the definitions of peace offered at various points in this book (pp. 25–6, 127–30, 214) and the much more sophisticated constructs of such historians as Wallace-Hadrill and Kershaw:³ peace is not the absence of war, but rather (in the best case) a state of quiet within a nation's borders produced by military victory and suppression of criminal activity; it is maintained by threat and force. The peace achieved by Scyld Scefing, who exacts tribute from neighbouring kings whom he holds in terrified subjection, seems entirely satisfactory to the *Beowulf* poet, who says, without obvious irony, *þæt wæs gōð cyning* 'that was a good king' (11).

However, it is Damico's critical technique that I mainly want to draw attention to here. Examining the dominant definition of this much-discussed word, she does not so much reject as modify it by refining the definition of one of its elements; and with such a relatively slight adjustment, she transforms Wealhtheow from the marginal, passive figure described by Hollander and others (above, pp. 119–23) into one who seems much more at home in the company of the warriors of the mead hall.

This chapter will offer brief readings of three of the queens of *Beowulf* with a view to modifying (perhaps not radically) the narratives that have dominated the critical discourse. We will begin by altering just one variable, as Damico does with *frīðusibb*. What happens to our readings if we drop the assumption that peacemaking is central to the Anglo-Saxon understanding of womanhood?

Wealhtheow and Thryth

Beowulf uses the word *frīðusibb* to describe Wealhtheow after his return to his homeland; it is very nearly the last time she is mentioned. This is how the poet introduces her as she enters Heorot—and the poem:

Ēode Wealhþeo forð
cwēn Hrōðgāres cynna gemyndig
grētte goldhroden guman on healle. (612–4)

Wealhtheow went forth,

³ Wallace-Hadrill, 'War and Peace'; Kershaw, *Peaceful Kings*, pp. 29–74.

Hrothgar's queen, mindful of manners,
the gold-adorned one greeted the men in the hall.

She proceeds to bring the cup to Hrothgar (almost as if she's read *Maxims I*) and then bears it around the hall until she comes to Beowulf. She is *cynna gemyndig* 'mindful of manners', *cynn* here clearly having to do with correct behaviour in a social setting.⁴ But the formula genitive + *gemyndig*, meaning 'bearing [something] in mind', is so common, and *cynn* so often means 'family, kinfolk', that the temptation to read 'mindful of kinfolk' is nearly irresistible.

And indeed she *is* mindful of her kin, especially her sons, whose interests she strenuously promotes. Wealhtheow's next appearance in the hall is the occasion (discussed in greater detail above, pp. 68–70) when she admonishes Hrothgar to leave *folc ond rīce* 'people and kingdom' to his *māgum* 'kinsmen' and admonishes Hrothulf (indirectly, as an expression of confidence) to honour her sons if he outlives his uncle (1178–87).⁵ Then she gives Beowulf rich gifts and asks him to look after her sons (1219–20, 1226–27). Schücking describes the scene:

She is a woman whose heart we hear pour out; and a woman should, as the beautiful expression employed by the poet a little later reads, be a *freoðuwebbe* 'giver of peace'. So she tries to do justice to her husband, her children and the honored stranger all at the same time, and indeed to Hrothulf, her husband's nephew, she does more than justice, in that the poet has already intimated

⁴ The nearest analogue to this passage is *Genesis A* 2433–5, in which Lot, being approached by angels (the very ones who are later called *freoðoscealcas*, 2499), *cynna gemunde / riht and gerisno, and þām rincum bēad / nihtfeormunge* 'remembered his manners and offered the men hospitality for the night'.

⁵ Hrothulf is represented as a sort of junior co-ruler with Hrothgar: they appear to be sitting together, presumably side by side on high seats (1164). *Widsith* 45–9 also seems to view them as co-rulers. He is the obvious heir to the throne, as Wealhtheow implicitly acknowledges when she admonishes him to honour her sons. I do not view the prospect of his succession to the throne as a 'usurpation', as is common in *Beowulf* criticism. Nor do I think it necessary to read Wealhtheow as actively promoting Hrothulf's claim to the throne (as in e.g. Dockray-Miller, *Motherhood and Mothering*, pp. 111–2): he will succeed Hrothgar in the ordinary course of things.

that his good relations with Hrothgar's family will not be of long duration. . . . But how dear peace is to her heart is emphasized by the ending of the following address to Beowulf, in which she very happily speaks of the unity, the harmony and the general goodwill which impress their character upon the festive company at the banquet.⁶

Schücking sees peace as the thing that Wealhtheow most desires, but what would Wealhtheow's speeches look like to one who read them without the conviction already in place that, since she is an Anglo-Saxon queen, that *must* be what she desires? It is her concern for her children that is most in evidence. Certainly she promotes friendship between the Danes and the Geats, urging Hrothgar to be generous with gifts (1173), but is friendship an end in itself or a way of procuring a powerful protector for her sons? What would she do or say if she thought that friendship with the Geats *would not* be good for her sons? Would she still appear to be the paragon of peaceful queens that Schücking and so many others have thought her to be? To put it another way, is Wealhtheow's peaceable behaviour a function of character or of circumstance?

The question is ultimately unanswerable. The circumstances in which we observe Wealhtheow's actions and speeches are what they are; we can't change them experimentally or administer a personality test. Yet the question is an important one, for if we decide that Wealhtheow's peaceable behaviour is even partly a response to the politics of the Danish royal house and the presence of a friendly but vaguely threatening foreign champion, then we have to admit the possibility that in other circumstances she *might*

⁶ *Heldenstoltz und Würde*, p. 42: 'Es ist eine Frau, die wir ihr Herz ausschütten hören, und eine Frau soll, wie der vom Dichter wenig später gebrauchte schöne Ausdruck lautet, vor allem eine *freoðu-webbe*', eine Friedensstifterin sein. So versucht sie denn auch gleichzeitig ihrem Gatten, ihren Kindern und dem geehrten Fremdling gerecht zu werden, ja dem Hroðulf, dem Neffen ihres Gatten wird sie sogar noch mehr als gerecht, denn daß sein gutes Verhältnis zu Hröðgars Geschlecht nicht von Dauer sein wird, hat der Dichter schon vorher angedeutet. . . . Wie sehr ihr aber der Frieden am Herzen liegt, wird noch durch den Schluß der folgenden Ansprache an Beowulf hervorgehoben, in dem sie sich ganz beglückt über die Eintracht, die Harmonie und das allgemeine Wohlwollen äußert, die der festlichen Vereinigung des Banketts ihr Gepräge aufdrücken.'

resort to violence. It's not as if queens have never been known to do that kind of thing.

An interesting attempt to come to terms with the issue of violence committed by Merovingian women is Nira Gradowicz-Pancer's 'De-Gendering Female Violence', which asks, 'instead of perceiving female violence as exceptional and surprising, should we not apprehend it as one of the fundamental principles of the Merovingian aristocratic code of honour, the use of aggressive bravado and physical violence representing strategies of distinction within the ruling class, without any differentiation of sex?' (p. 5). The question announces the author's thesis: she rejects the traditional view that the practice of violence was more or less exclusively a male preserve and that the default position of any woman in a violent tale was that of victim. Analysing in detail three examples (among many) of women committing or ordering acts of violence, she concludes that Merovingian women were motivated by honour, much as the men were, and operated well within the norms of the Frankish ruling class.

It is a commonplace that for women in many cultures (including that of medieval Europe) honour is above all a reputation for chastity. Frank Henderson Stewart writes,

Where women do have personal honor, the main component of that honor is very often chastity; women are given little opportunity to display such virtues as courage in battle, and qualities of integrity that they display tend to be confined to the domestic sphere. If there is a system of reflexive honor,⁷ women are not normally direct participants in it: when a woman's honor is impugned and a counterattack has to be made, then it is usually a man who will make it. In the Icelandic sagas women are often represented as possessing a strong sense of honor, and where there is no alternative they themselves may take up weapons to avenge their honor.⁸

⁷ Reflexive honor, according to Stewart, is characteristic of systems in which, 'if A impugns B's honor, then B's honor is ipso facto diminished or destroyed, unless B responds with an appropriate counterattack on A' (*Honor*, p. 64). Stewart sees this as typical of early Germanic societies.

⁸ *Honor*, p. 107. Stewart continues, 'yet even so, the way a saga expresses explicitly the fact that a woman has a strong sense of honor is by calling her a *drengr góðr*, a term that taken literally means "a fine (young) man"'. But here he has been misled by Gehl,

Lynn Marie Laufenberg argues that Icelandic women were not the only ones who were able to gain or defend honour by violent means:

In both the Mediterranean and the European north, women could play an active role in inciting vendetta and urging reluctant male kin to take revenge. And although women did not normally participate directly in blood feuds, legal records reveal that they did retaliate personally, both verbally and physically, against men and other women for insult and injury.⁹

In legend, it is not unusual for women to win honour by performing violent deeds with their own hands: such women as Brynhild of *Völsunga Saga* (also Brunhild of *Das Nibelungenlied*), Hervör of *Hervarar Saga*, who even as a young girl *drap menn til fjár sér* 'killed men for her gain',¹⁰ and Alvilda of Saxo's *Gesta Danorum*, who, disappointed in love, embarks on a career of violence, leading a band of viking *puellae*,¹¹ are represented as both admirable and desirable, despite being somewhat unruly. It is tempting to read Judith as belonging to this group; certainly her deed wins her great honour (above, pp. 44–46), as does her chastity. Aldhelm finds her a disturbing figure; but it is not so much her violence he deplores as her fine clothing and jewellery, exclaiming, *ornatus feminarum rapinus virorum vocatur* 'the adornment of women is called the depredation of men'.¹²

Ruhm und Ehre, p. 121 (see Stewart, *Honor*, pp. 154–7 for Gehl's influence on his thinking about honour in Germanic cultures). Gehl mentions two women referred to as *drengr góðr* in *Njáls Saga*, Bergþóra and Hildigunn (ch. 20, 95; Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, *Brennu-Njáls Saga*, pp. 57, 239). Both are also described as *skaphǫrð* 'fierce-natured', and the phrase *drengr góðr* seems to be offered in mitigation of the harsh description. Cook translates the phrase 'a fine person' and 'a fine woman' (*Njal's Saga*, pp. 36, 163). Gehl also points to the phrase *drengilig kona* introducing Ásdís in *Eyrbyggja Saga* (ch. 18; Einar Ólafur Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, *Eyrbyggja Saga*, p. 33): *drengilig kona ok heldr skapstór* 'noble lady and strong-minded'. The words *drengr* and *drengiligr* appear to relate to bravery and nobility of character, but only indirectly, if at all, to honour. They may somewhat masculinize the descriptions in which they occur, but this is uncertain.

⁹ Laufenberg, 'Honor and Reputation', p. 376.

¹⁰ C. Tolkien, *The Saga of King Heidrek the Wise*, p. 10.

¹¹ J. Olrik and Ræder, *Saxonis Gesta Danorum*, VII.vi.4–7; Davidson, *History of the Danes*, i. 211–2.

¹² Ehwald, *Aldhelmi opera*, p. 317; Lapidge and Herren, *Aldhelm: The Prose Works*, p. 127.

On the other hand, violent women are everywhere more likely to acquire bad reputations than violent men: witness the obvious hatred of Gregory of Tours for the Frankish queen Fredegund and that of Fredegar for Fredegund's enemy Brunhild,¹³ or the generally negative treatment of the Norwegian queen Gunnhild in Icelandic sources.¹⁴ Anglo-Saxon England has fewer chroniclers and historians with a taste for the lurid than either Francia or Iceland, but we do have tales of and allusions to violent acts attributed to Anglo-Saxon queens: Alhfred, reputed to have killed her husband Peada, king of the Middle Angles (*HE* iii.24); Eadburh, daughter of Offa of Mercia married to Beorhtric of the West Saxons, whom Asser charges with multiple murders;¹⁵ Cwenthryth, daughter of Cenwulf of Mercia, believed to have instigated the murder of her brother Cynehelm (St Kenelm) around 811;¹⁶ and Ælfthryth, queen of Eadgar the Peaceable and mother of Æthelræd the Unready, who was widely suspected of organizing the death of King Eadweard the Martyr.

Of these four, Ælfthryth is the one most comparable to Wealhtheow: after all, if she did commit murder, she did so to advance the interests of her son Æthelræd, who succeeded Eadweard—the same motive that leads Wealhtheow to promote friendship. Of course, it is far from certain that Ælfthryth was guilty of the crime.¹⁷ But here we are concerned not so much with what actually happened as with the stories that were told; and the reputation of Ælfthryth plummeted over the two centuries following 978 until, by the time the *Liber Eliensis* was compiled around the end of the twelfth century, she was being accused of witchcraft, promiscuity, bestiality and at least one more murder.¹⁸ Indeed, if the earliest detailed account of the killing, that of Byrhtferth's *Vita S Oswaldi* (composed between 997

¹³ *HF* iv–x, *passim*; Fredegar, *Chronicle* (Wallace-Hadrill, *Fredegarii chronicorum liber quartus*, pp. 12–35).

¹⁴ Specifically, *Njáls Saga*, *Egils Saga* and *Heimskringla*.

¹⁵ Stevenson, *Asser's Life of King Alfred*, pp. 12–3.

¹⁶ See Matthew and Harrison, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, svv. Cynehelm, Cwenthryth.

¹⁷ See Keynes, *Diplomas of King Æthelred*, pp. 167–74; Lapidge, *Byrhtferth of Ramsey: The Lives of St Oswald and St Ecgbwine*, p. 138 n. 166.

¹⁸ Blake, *Liber Eliensis*, pp. 127–8; Fairweather, *Liber Eliensis*, pp. 153–4.

and 1002), reflects what was generally believed, it would be surprising if the queen *had not* come under suspicion, and quickly too, for the perpetrators were nobles who had joined her in supporting Æthelræd's claim to the throne, and the killing took place at the queen's residence.¹⁹ A modern political consultant would say that the optics were bad.

As a political tool, regicide has appeal for both men and women, and so has killing to advance the interests of one's children. Anglo-Saxon examples of regicide come easily to mind: the murder of St Oswine on Oswiu's orders in 642 (*HE* iii.14), the murder of Æthelbald of Mercia in 757 (*ASC* A 755), the killing of Cynewulf of the West Saxons by Cyneheard in 786 (*ASC* A 755, 784). And we catch a glimpse of the murderous politics that a king might engage in to ensure the succession of a favoured heir in Alcuin's mention of Offa's having spilled *multum sanguinis* 'much blood' to secure the Mercian throne for his son Ecgfrith.²⁰

That Alcuin saw the premature death of Ecgfrith as God's judgement on Offa's bloodymindedness shows clearly enough that homicidal kings could draw negative comment; we see from the stories of Eadburh and Ælfthryth that the homicidal queen might in addition attract suspicions of witchcraft and sexual perversion. But it is not clear that a queen *must* acquire a bad reputation simply by virtue of being responsible for one or more deaths. Gregory of Tours seems to have thought well of Brunhild, and it is worth remembering the presence in the coronation *ordo* of Esther and Judith, who brought about *confusionem inimicorum* 'the destruction of their enemies' (above, p. 134). A queen who (like Æthelflæd of Mercia) committed violence in an honourable way (above, pp. 14–15) or against people widely agreed to be enemies could fare well in the court of public opinion. Killing vikings earns one a good reputation where killing pious youths does not.

Byrhtferth's *Vita S Oswaldi*, interestingly, includes a characterization of Eadweard that, had it caught on, might well have excused those who plotted his murder. He was, Byrhtferth says, a violent man who beat his thegns, and the nobles who did away with him hoped that Æthelræd would

¹⁹ Lapidge, *Byrhtferth of Ramsey: The Lives of St Oswald and St Ecgvine*, pp. 138–41.

²⁰ Dümmler, *Epistolae karolini aevi tomus ii*, p. 179.

be gentler.²¹ Had it come to be widely believed that Eadweard was guilty of *unrihtum dædum* ‘unjust deeds’, like Sigebryht of the West Saxons in 757 (*ASC* A 755), he would hardly have been venerated as a saint. But Byrhtferth’s narrative shows clearly how the wind was blowing: after briefly noting Eadweard’s violence, he (confusingly) likens his killers to Judas, while the young king becomes a Christ-like innocent. This is the version of Eadweard that would soon win out. Another cause of the decline of Ælfthryth’s reputation was surely the decline of that of her son, who in a sense dragged her down with him. Had Æthelræd’s reign been like those of the victorious Alfred and Æthelstan, the act that placed him on the throne, and the people responsible for it, might well have been remembered more fondly.

Let us return to Thryth, with whom we began Chapter Four, and specifically the poet’s comment on her activities (this time with a more modern translation):

Ne bið swylc cwēnlic þēaw
 idese tō efnanne, þēah ðe hīo ænlicu sȳ,
 þætte freoðuwebbe fēores onsæce
 æfter ligetorne lēofne mannan.

It is not queenly for a woman
 to engage in such behaviour, even if she’s pretty,
 that a peaceweaver should demand the life of
 a beloved man on account of a pretended wrath.²²

This is not a blanket condemnation of violence by women. The charge, rather, is that Thryth pretends to be angry or in distress, and that it is not

²¹ *nonnulli ex principibus desiderabant iuniorem, quia mitior apparuit omnibus in sermone et opere. Senior uero non solum timorem sed etiam terrorem incussit cunctis; qui persecutus est eos non uerbis tantum, uerum etiam diris uerberibus, et maxime suos secum mansitantes* ‘some of the ealdormen wanted the younger son, because he seemed more gentle to everyone in word and deed. But the elder son struck not only fear but even terror into everyone; he hounded them not only with tongue-lashings, but even with cruel beatings—and most of all those who were members of his own household’ (Lapidge, *Byrhtferth of Ramsey: The Lives of St Oswald and St Ecwine*, pp. 136–9).

²² Or ‘feigned distress’. The common translation ‘feigned injury’ is unlikely, since ‘injury’ is not among the meanings of *torn*.

fitting for a queen to demand that a man be put to death on account of such a falsehood. The passage leaves open an important question: if she *really* felt anger or distress, would her behaviour then be queenly? There is no suggestion that she carries out her sentences with her own hands: presumably men do so on her behalf, and *they*, at least, must believe that she feels what she claims to feel (or at least that it is politic to appear to believe) and that that is reason enough for a man to die. Romance writers certainly thought a queen's wrath a serious matter. In Marie de France's *Lanval*, when the hero insults Queen Guinevere, she reacts with strong emotions:

La reïne s'en part atant,
 En sa chambrë en vait plurant.
 Mut fu dolente e curuciee
 De ceo k'il l'out si avilee.
 En sun lit malade cucha;
 Jamés, ceo dit, ne levera,
 Si li reis ne l'en feseit dreit
 De ceo dunt ele se pleindreit.²³ (303–10)

Therewith the queen departed
 and went to her chamber, weeping.
 She was distressed and angry
 because he had humiliated her so.
 She lay down sick in her bed
 and said that she'd never get up again
 if the king did not do her justice
 respecting that which she complained of.

When King Arthur returns from a pleasant day of hunting, the queen tells him (falsely) that Lanval has asked for her love and (truthfully) that he has insulted her by boasting that his lover's lowest serving-maid is worthier and more beautiful than herself. The king, perceiving her anger but misled as to its cause, furiously declares that such behaviour deserves burning or hanging (*Il le ferat arder u pendre*, 328) and has Lanval summoned to him:

²³ Ewert, *Marie de France: Lais*, cited by line number.

Vassal, vus me avez mut mesfait!
 Trop començastes vilein plait
 De mei hunir e aviler
 E la reïne lendengier. (363–6)

Vassal, you've done me a great wrong!
 You began too base an affair
 by dishonouring and humiliating me
 and insulting the queen.

The king's language is of dishonour (*hunir*), humiliation (*aviler*) and insult or injury (*lendengier*). Both he and the queen will lose honour unless they avenge themselves.

Thryth sets the bar rather low for *lèse majesté* and sexual impropriety, but the crimes she alleges are surely analogous to those claimed by Guinevere: she is not punishing suitors, like Brunhild of *Das Nibelungenlied*,²⁴ but rather those who look at her by day, their gaze challenging, even violating her at a time when others can see. Gillian Overing writes,

Her rebellion—which is essentially a refusal to be ‘seen’, to be the object of the masculine gaze—constitutes a direct confrontation with the masculine symbolic order. Her violent response to being ‘seen’ reveals the barely displaced violence of the act of staring as appropriation. Modthryth remains a mystery; she is not motivated by love of family (as is the other violent female of the poem, Grendel's mother). Her display of power and violence are self-generated—her rebellion comes from no recognizable source or place, just as her story surfaces in the poem rather abruptly.²⁵

Overing invokes the ‘male gaze’, an idea originating in film criticism that has also found favour among medieval literary scholars. The gaze is more than mere looking. It aims to dominate and control: Overing describes it as a violent appropriation. Others have seen it as akin to rape: thus Karma Lochrie, writing of Holofernes in *Judith*, sees his gaze (dramatized

²⁴ The association of the Thryth episode with stories of princesses who (like the classical Atalanta) imposed a test on suitors who would be killed if they failed is a commonplace: see e.g. Fulk, Bjork, and Niles, *Klaeber's Beowulf*, p. 222.

²⁵ Overing, *Language, Sign, and Gender*, p. xxv; see also p. 104.

by the *flēohnet* ‘curtain’ (47) surrounding his bed, which allows him to spy on others without being seen) as essential to his power, ‘[w]hether he is exerting mastery over his retinue, seeking to subdue the Bethulians, or planning to rape Judith’.²⁶ And in connection with Oringles’s attempted violation of Enite in Hartmann von Aue’s *Erec*, Albrecht Classen writes of ‘the male gaze as the first stage leading to rape’.²⁷

At the very end of the Middle Ages, Marguerite de Navarre dramatized the connection between the male gaze and rape in the eleventh *Nouvelle* of her *Heptaméron*, which tells how a lady named Roncey, while staying at a monastery, finds herself urgently in need of a visit *au lieu où l’on ne peult envoyer sa chambrière* ‘to the place where one cannot send one’s maid’. Unfortunately, the privy is foul with the monks’ ordure, and the lady is in such a hurry that she sits without looking down and sticks fast to the seat. In great distress, she calls loudly to her maid, a girl called La Mothe, *m’amy, je suis perdue et deshonorée!* ‘my dear, I am ruined and dishonoured!’ whereupon La Mothe, thinking that the monks are raping her mistress, summons whomever she can find to her aid. The *gentilzhommes* ‘gentlemen’ who answer the call discover Roncey in a state of undress, since she has lifted her garments to avoid soiling them; and finding themselves superfluous as rescuers, they merely look and laugh while Roncey endures *honte* ‘shame’.²⁸

Marguerite constructs a hierarchy of womanly shame—soiled backside, male gaze, rape—in which the first two enact the third as parody. When Roncey calls out to La Mothe in words (*perdue et deshonorée*) that a rape victim might use in calling for help, she triggers events that culminate in something much more like rape than what she has suffered so far. Like the

²⁶ ‘Gender, Sexual Violence, and the Politics of War’, p. 9. For comment on attitudes towards rape in Anglo-Saxon England, see Coleman, ‘Rape in Anglo-Saxon England’, Saunders, *Rape and Ravishment*, pp. 33–48 and Horner, ‘Language of Rape’.

²⁷ Classen, *Sexual Violence and Rape*, p. 25 n. 45. Classen’s references at this place seem oddly irrelevant to his assertion—which is, however, supported by the text of *Erec*. For the association of the male gaze and rape in media studies, see Boyle, *Media and Violence*, pp. 123–60.

²⁸ Text in Salminen, *Marguerite de Navarre: Heptaméron*, pp. 73–4; for commentary see Cholakian, *Rape and Writing*, pp. 113–5.

'harassment' falsely alleged by Guinevere, both rape and the stares of the *gentilzhommes* are acts of sexual invasion aimed at a woman at a moment of vulnerability; and both, in inflicting *honte*, are assaults upon her honour, threats to her reputation and status. Marguerite represents the difference as one of degree rather than kind.²⁹

In Marguerite's comedy, Roncey must (after a suitable interval) 'get over it' and join in the laughter. For Thryth, on the other hand, the male gaze is evidently no laughing matter. If she experiences it as *honte* (or that word's Old English cognate, *hȳnðo* 'humiliation'), her way of 'getting over it' is to strike out with the royal power she is able to command and have the offender put to death. The poet does not deny that men stare, or even that a woman might justly complain about their doing so; but he finds it incredible that staring should provoke such anger. Surely she must (like Guinevere) be lying about that.

The women of medieval narrative who claim to be victims of sexual crimes are not always untruthful. The prototypical rape victim for the Middle Ages is Lucretia, whose story Livy tells in Book I of *Ab urbe condita*, and briefly in a text available to the Anglo-Saxons, Orosius's *Historia*.³⁰ But a better example, because accompanied by more detail, comes from the Old English translation of the late classical romance *Apollonius of Tyre*. At the very beginning of the tale King Antiochus, while pondering a suitable match for his daughter (who is not named), comes to the realization that he wants her for himself, and *þā ongēanwinnendan fēmnan mid micelre strengðe earfōðlice ofercōm* 'and by great exertion barely overcame the struggling woman'.³¹ Then her *fōstormōdor* (Latin *nutrix* 'nurse') discovers her:

Ðā gewearð hit þæt þæs mædenes fōstormōdor intō ðām būre ēode and ge-seah hī ðār sittan on micelre gedrēfednesse and hire cwæð tō: 'Hwig eart þū, hlāfdige, swā gedrēfedes mōdes?' Þæt mæden hyre andswerode: 'Lēofe fōstormōdor, nū tōdæg forwurdon twēgen æðele naman on þisum būre.'

²⁹ Roncey eventually forgives La Mothe for bringing the men to the privy because she realizes that *la pauvre fille croyoit qu'elle eust beaucoup pis* 'the poor girl believed she had it much worse'.

³⁰ Bately, *The Old English Orosius*, 40.1-9.

³¹ Quotations from Goolden, *The Old English Apollonius of Tyre*, §§ 1-2.

Then it happened that the maiden's nurse went into the chamber and saw her sitting there in great anguish and said to her: 'Lady, why are you so anguished in mind?' The maiden answered her: 'dear nurse, now today two noble names have perished in this chamber.'

Two points concerning this passage are especially relevant to our discussion. First, the Old English translator places special emphasis on the girl's emotional distress. In the Latin text, the nurse sees her *flebili uultu* 'with a tearful face' and also the floor spattered with blood from the rupture of her hymen.³² The Old English translator (perhaps partly out of delicacy) omits the blood entirely; rather, the nurse sees that she is *on micelre gedrēfednesse* 'in great anguish', and her genuine distress is sufficient proof that she is telling the truth. Second, her immediate concern is the loss of honour that her father's act must inevitably cause for both of them: Old English *nama*, like Latin *nomen*, which it translates, can mean 'honour, reputation'. Having committed a great crime, Antiochus is no longer deserving of honour, and having been robbed of her virginity, his daughter, through no fault of her own, must suffer a loss of honour as well. She attempts to commit suicide, following Lucretia's example, but the nurse dissuades her and (oddly, from our point of view) encourages her to comply with her father's wishes.

Much later in the narrative word comes to Apollonius that Antiochus has been killed by lightning while lying with his daughter,³³ and thus God takes on Thryth's role to exact revenge for rape and incest. The fate of the daughter is unknown, but her disappearance from the narrative seems in its way a version of the demise of Lucretia, who sets the pattern for all medieval rape victims. She cannot be blamed, and yet her honour is gone and she *will* be blamed: John Gower's version of Lucretia declares, moments before she seizes the sword, that 'Never afterward the world ne schal / Reproeuen hire'.³⁴

These tales of rape and violation, from Lucretia to Roncey, represent a woman's most unbearable loss as that of her honour; and I would suggest

³² Kortekaas, *Apollonius King of Tyre*, pp. 106–7.

³³ Kortekaas, *Apollonius King of Tyre*, pp. 156–7; this part of the Old English translation has been lost.

³⁴ Peck, *John Gower: Confessio Amantis*, vii.5063–4, p. 405.

that early readers of the Thryth story would have understood that from her point of view the insolent stares of nameless admirers were likewise assaults upon her honour. And even though a woman's honour is likely to be based more on her chastity than on her warmaking, it is still, like a man's honour, 'surplus dignity', which 'must be defended with the knife or sword' (above, p. 13). This is what the Frankish women surveyed by Gradowicz-Pancer do, and also women like Bergþóra and Hallgerð of *Njáls Saga*, who fiercely defend their status from the smallest slights. Thryth belongs with these women, their violence not anomalous, not coming 'from no recognizable source or place', but rather perfectly comprehensible in the context of a social system in which the defence of one's honour is all but mandatory.

A last point about Thryth concerns her reputation, which remains low among modern scholars who subscribe to the modern ideology of character as unchanging.³⁵ But Thryth emerges from her narrative *gōde mære* 'good and widely admired' like Wealhtheow (1952; cf. 2016), loving to her husband, mother of an excellent son (1954, 1960–62). Ælfthryth evidently continued to enjoy influence and high status even as suspicions grew concerning her involvement in Eadweard's death:³⁶ as late as the twelfth century, the lurid story of her crimes coexisted in the *Liber Eliensis* with the memory of her benefactions.³⁷ Such pious acts could be interpreted as an ineffectual penance:³⁸ whatever the state of her soul, her worldly reputation could never be wholly rehabilitated. But piety did not have to be read that way. Guðrún of *Laxdæla Saga*, perhaps the greatest of Iceland's

³⁵ My introduction to the idea that in modern fictions the essentials of character do not change was via Catherine Belsey's *Critical Practice*, first published in 1980 and now in a second edition (pp. 52–77). But another memorable statement of the principle is spoken by Dashiell Hammett's Sam Spade: 'once a chump, always a chump' (Hammett, *The Maltese Falcon*, ch. 20).

³⁶ According to Keynes, *Diplomas of King Æthelred*, pp. 171–3, she continued to witness diplomas and found monasteries and maintained an alliance with bishop Æthelwold. See also Yorke, 'Æthelwold and the Politics of the Tenth Century', pp. 81–6.

³⁷ Blake, *Liber Eliensis*, pp. 111, 116.

³⁸ As pointed out by Keynes, *Diplomas of King Æthelred*, p. 169: 'Indeed, Æthelred and Ælfthryth were not given the benefit of any doubt: every act that they may have done from pious and honourable motives has since been interpreted as an act of atonement for their alleged part in the murder of Edward.'

inciting women, ended a long and eventful life as that nation's first nun and recluse, much revered by all. St Clotilde, who for Gregory of Tours embodies the ideal of Christian queenship, sounds for all the world like Guðrún as she confronts her sons:

Non me paeneteat, carissimi, uos dulciter enutrisse; indignate, quaeso, iniuriam meam et patris matrisque meae mortem sagaci studio uindecate. (*HF* iii.6)

My dears, do not make me regret having so kindly raised you; I ask that you get angry about the injustice that has been done me and with keen zeal avenge the death of my father and mother.

On the expedition which they undertake at her urging her eldest son Chlodomer meets an ignominious end, but neither this nor her ambition for worldly power lessens her saintly reputation (iii.18). And why should it? According to legend, even the Virgin Mary committed homicide by proxy when she commanded St Mercurius to slay *Godes widersacan* 'God's adversary', Julian the Apostate.³⁹ Wealhtheow's reputation has always been high; but that, as we see, does not mean that she could never have, like Thryth or the Queen of Heaven herself, committed acts of violence.

More than twenty years after Gillian Overing criticized the 'binarism' of critical approaches to the women of *Beowulf* while admitting that she found it hard to escape,⁴⁰ the study of women in the Middle Ages has advanced far in the direction that she pointed out.⁴¹ Yet in some ways we remain prisoners of a binary paradigm that sorts the women of *Beowulf* into

³⁹ The story was told by Ælfric, *Depositio S. Basilii episcopi* (Skeat, *Ælfric's Lives of Saints*, iii.204–91; cf. *Natale S. Agnetis uirginis*, *ibid.* vii.419–20) and *De assumptione beatae Mariae* (Clemoes and Godden, *Catholic Homilies I*, xxx.199–257).

⁴⁰ Overing, *Language, Sign, and Gender*, pp. 76, 110.

⁴¹ See especially (though I have disagreed with some of these works in particulars) Hollis, *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church*; Dockray-Miller, *Motherhood and Mothering*; Lees and Overing, *Double Agents*; Klein, *Ruling Women*; Blanton, *Signs of Devotion*. For a worthwhile survey of the field and useful bibliography, see Dockray-Miller, 'Old English Literature and Feminist Theory', which sees feminist criticism of Anglo-Saxon culture as increasingly breaking free of old, restrictive paradigms. One of these paradigms, I would say, is the peaceweaver, which is not mentioned by Lees and Overing or Blanton, and given only cursory treatment by Dockray-Miller—a sign, perhaps, of its decreasing relevance to modern feminist scholarship.

bins labeled 'violent/bad' and 'peaceable/good'. Into one we put Thryth (she must share it with Grendel's mother—not the best company!) and we put Wealhtheow into the other. I would suggest, rather, that in Thryth and Wealhtheow we see not different kinds of queen but different aspects of queenship. The queen wielded power, and for any early medieval ruler, male or female, using and maintaining power could mean shedding blood. Performing work like that of the violence she was able to deploy (see above, p. 57), her trove of honour and treasure gave her a peaceful way of binding the warriors of the mead hall to herself and inducing them to do as she bade them.

Freawaru

It is a commonplace that Anglo-Saxon women were often given in marriage to settle disputes; the idea is firmly fixed in literary and, to a lesser extent, historical scholarship.⁴² But a search through Anglo-Saxon primary sources for marriages described as having peace as their aim yields just one clear example, that of Freawaru which, as Beowulf returns home from Denmark, is soon to take place:

Sio gehāten is,
geong, goldhroden, gladum suna Frōdan;
hafað þæs geworden wine Scyldinga,
rīces hyrde, ond þæt ræd talað,
þæt hē mid ðy wīfe wælfāhða dæl,
sæcca gesette. Oft seldan hwær
æfter lēodhryre lýtle hwīle
bongār būgeð, þeah sēo brȳd duge (2024–31)

Young and gold-adorned,
she is betrothed to the happy son of Froda.
The lord of the Scyldings, the guardian of the kingdom,
has agreed, and considers it a good idea,

⁴² See above, pp. 109, 110, 119, 120, 121; also Kliman, 'Women in Early English Literature', p. 33; Stafford, *Queens, Concubines, and Dowagers*, pp. 28–9; Chance, *Woman as Hero*, p. 1; Enright, *Lady with a Mead Cup*, pp. 21–2; and many more.

that he will settle a quarrel, a deadly conflict,
by means of that woman. Very seldom anywhere,
after the fall of a king, does the deadly spear rest
even for a little while, though the bride is good.

Beowulf has much to say about how he expects the marriage and the peace-agreement to fall apart (above, p. 63), but of the marriage itself, and the negotiations leading up to it, this is all we get.

Marriage for peace seems to have been much less common than the scholarship suggests;⁴³ yet there is reason to believe that it did occasionally take place. For one thing, we are not entirely without analogues: Dudo of St Quentin's *Gesta Normannorum* tells that, after the French defeated the Norman leader Rollo, he was given Gisla, the daughter of Charles the Simple, as part of a peace-agreement that included his receiving a grant of land and pledging fealty to Charles.⁴⁴ Both marriage and bride are almost certainly fictitious, but no more so than the marriage of Freawaru. And in Anglo-Saxon England it is possible to locate at least a few examples of historical queens exchanged between nations we know to have been rivals:

- Eanfled of Deira to Oswiu of Bernicia (642 or 643; *HE* iii.15).
- An unnamed sister of Penda of Mercia to Cenwalh of the West Saxons (before ca. 645). After Cenwalh repudiated her, Penda drove him from his kingdom (*HE* iii.7, *ASC* A 645, 646, 648).
- Cyneburg, daughter of Penda, to Alhfrith, son of Oswiu (before 653; *HE* iii.21).
- Alhfled, daughter of Oswiu, to Peada, son of Penda and king of the Middle Angles (653). She was thought to be implicated in her husband's murder in 656 (*HE* iii.21, 24).
- Osthryth, daughter of Oswiu, to Æthelred of Mercia (before 679). She is said to have been murdered by Mercian nobles in 697 (*HE* iv.21).

⁴³ See Kershaw, *Peaceful Kings*, p. 20: 'Whilst marriage alliances are not uncommon outside the Old English poetic corpus they largely occur as a means of fostering and furthering pre-existing positive relationships, often at potentially dangerous moments, rather than establishing a sharp transition from outright hostility to peace.'

⁴⁴ Lair, *De moribus et actis primorum Normanniae ducum*, p. 166; Christiansen, *Dudo of St Quentin: History of the Normans*, p. 46.

- An unnamed sister of Æthelstan to Sihtric, Norse king of Northumbria (926). Sihtric died the next year, and Æthelstan took control of Northumbria (*ASC* D 925, 926).

These marriages need to be interpreted with caution, as our sources have very little to say about them. For example, Bede (*HE* iii.21) explains that Peada approached Oswiu to ask for the hand of Alhfléd and was told that he must first accept Christianity; for Bede this is a story about the conversion of the Middle Angles, not relations between Bernicia and its neighbours, and he shows little interest in the political background. At this time the pagan king Penda was ascendant, and Oswiu's policy towards Mercia seems to have been to avoid stirring things up; and yet Peada's conversion at his urging and his return home with four Northumbrian priests look for all the world like acts of submission. We are left on our own to puzzle out the complicated politics of the region while Bede moves on to the next pious story.

We have other difficulties with the marriage of Eanfled to Oswiu. Plummer writes, 'The political object of this marriage . . . was no doubt to conciliate the loyalty of Deira.'⁴⁵ This may well be. But Oswiu's marriage looks like a shrewd political move from several angles: Eanfled was the daughter of a Kentish princess, and an alliance with Kent was surely desirable. She was the daughter of Eadwine, who had ruled a unified Northumbria, and she belonged to a different branch of the Deiran royal family from Oswine (Eadwine's cousin), who at the time of the marriage is likely to have looked, from her point of view as much as Oswiu's, like an ominous rising power; her branch of the family stood to gain if Oswiu was able to extend his power over Deira. And in fact Ecgrith, issue of the marriage of Eanfled and Oswiu, would later succeed to the throne of a unified Northumbria, no doubt claiming the right to rule Deira as the grandson of Eadwine. Oswiu may well have had peace as a goal in marrying Eanfled, but his greater aim had to be domination of Deira.

Of the marriages listed above, the most interesting for our purpose is that of Penda's sister to Cenwalh, which we know of only because Bede (*HE* iii.7, followed by *ASC* A 645, 646) recorded its dissolution and the

⁴⁵ *Venerabilis Baedae Opera Historica*, ii. 165.

aftermath. But we can piece together a chronology to provide some background:

- 626 Penda comes to the Mercian throne (*ASC A*; this date, like most of the dates in this list, must be regarded as approximate).
- 628 Cynegils, king of the West Saxons, and his son Cwichelm fight with Penda at Cirencester and come to terms—this is generally interpreted as a defeat for the West Saxons (*ASC A*).
- 635 Cynegils is baptized with Oswald of Northumbria standing sponsor; afterwards Oswald marries Cynegils's daughter; Cwichelm is baptized and dies the next year (*HE*; *ASC A*).
- 642 Oswald falls in battle against Penda (*HE*; *ASC A*).
- 643 Cynegils dies, and his son Cenwalh succeeds him (*HE*; *ASC A*).
- 645 Cenwalh is driven from his kingdom by Penda, having repudiated his wife, Penda's sister. He spends three years in exile with Anna, king of the East Angles (and father of St Æthelthryth), another enemy of Penda (*HE*; *ASC A*).
- 646 Cenwalh is baptized while staying with Anna (*HE*; *ASC A*).
- 648 Around this date Cenwalh returns to his kingdom (*HE*).

If Bede can be trusted, Penda was an overwhelming fact of life for Anglo-Saxon rulers throughout this period: he figures in *HE* as an aggressive and nearly unbeatable military leader with an uncanny knack for killing rival kings in battle. Barbara Yorke has plausibly interpreted Cynegils's reciprocal relationship with the powerful Oswald of Northumbria as an 'alliance . . . in the face of a common enemy'.⁴⁶ But when did Cenwalh marry Penda's sister? The sources give no hint. It has been suggested that the marriage was part of the peace agreement following the battle of Cirencester in 628,⁴⁷ and this is likely, but one cannot rule out any year between that of the battle and 645—except for the period during which Penda's threat was contained through the alliance with Oswald. During those years, the West Saxons and the Mercians are unlikely to have enjoyed the kind of

⁴⁶ *Wessex in the Early Middle Ages*, p. 171.

⁴⁷ Sims-Williams, *Religion and Literature*, p. 27; Yorke, *Wessex in the Early Middle Ages*, p. 57.

relations that lead to marriage alliances. After the fall of Oswald it appears that Penda was able to resume his domination of the kingdoms south of the Thames.

There is no time at which the marriage could have been an exchange between equals; it could only have taken place at a time when the West Saxons were compelled to acknowledge Mercian overlordship. And though the facts are sparse, we can nevertheless read in them that the continuation of the marriage was understood as a sign that the relationship it symbolized—one of West Saxon submission—remained in effect. When Cenwalh sent his queen away, it was a declaration of independence from Mercia, which Penda answered with force. It is not known how Cenwalh was restored to his kingdom; the possibility cannot be ruled out that he made peace with Penda, perhaps even took back his Mercian queen. Historians assume that he did not, but I like to think that the Seaxburg who survived Cenwalh and ruled for one year after him (*ASC* A 672) just might have been Penda's sister. Certainly Mercia seems to have dominated the West Saxons throughout this period and beyond.

Other marriages on our list—those of Cyneburg to Alhfrith, Osthryth to Æthelred and Æthelstan's sister to Sihtric—are similar to that of Penda's sister to Cenwalh in that they involve the transfer of a woman from what is probably a dominant group to one that is weaker.⁴⁸ For that matter, the fictional marriage of Gisla to Rollo is of the same kind. But how did such marriages work to bind a submissive or vanquished king to a dominant or victorious one?

There are two obvious answers. One of these is the creation of kinship ties, as Kemble pointed out long ago in the remainder of the sentence that

⁴⁸ In continental sources, marriages involving the transfer of a woman from the weaker to the stronger group are likely to be what historians call 'Raubehe', the taking of a wife by force or intimidation. Such are the marriages of Rosemund to Alboin as told in Paul the Deacon's *Historia Langobardorum* (Waitz, *Scriptores rerum langobardicarum*, i.27, ii.28–30: pp. 68–70, 87–9) and of St Radegund to Clothar as told by Gregory of Tours (*HF* iii.7) and Venantius Fortunatus (*Vita S. Radegundis*, Krusch, *Venanti opera pedestria*, pp. 38–9). According to *HF* ii.28, Gundobad of the Burgundians, uncle of St Clotilde, was intimidated into allowing Clovis to take her as his queen. All of these accounts are likely to be highly romanticized. I do not know of any instances of Raubehe involving queens in Anglo-Saxon England.

ends a passage already quoted (above, p. 109):

Hence the profound importance attached to chastity, and the undoubted influence of alliances by marriage, through which separate kindreds are fused into one body, adopting common interests, pursuing common objects, and recognizing in the bond which unites its members, obligations which are still exhibited in oriental countries, which we trace throughout the middle ages of Europe, but which are gradually vanishing under the conditions of our modern, mercantile society. (i. 233-4)

There is something in this; but Kemble is writing in general terms of marriage for political purposes. The problem with marriage for peace is that creating close relationships between former enemies can be counterproductive, multiplying opportunities for the renewal of conflict (see below, pp. 185-186).

The second obvious answer is that of Jane Chance (above, p. 122), that a marriage can promote peace by producing children who belong to both groups. There is also something in this. Even when one of the groups is dominant and (as likely happened with the marriage of Penda's sister to Cenwalh) imposes a queen on the other, so that the marriage amounts to a hostile invasion of a rival gene pool, the resulting kinship ties may well, over the long term, lead to something more than a *pro forma* alliance. In marrying his sister to Cenwalh, Penda could look forward to the prospect that his sister's son might one day sit on the West Saxon throne.

But the actual outcome of this marriage reveals another problem. Whether or not Cenwalh took back his Mercian wife, Penda predeceased Cenwalh, whose son (if he had one) did not succeed him. The prospect of a kinsman sitting on the throne of a former enemy was distant and uncertain. Even if such a plan was successful, the benefit would likely go to someone else, as Ecgfrith was the beneficiary of the marriage of Eanfled and Oswiu. One suspects that Penda had more immediate benefits in view when he sent his sister to be Cenwalh's bride.

There is a third answer, not quite so obvious, which fits well with what this book has had to say so far about gift exchange: that marriage must be understood as gift, functioning like other gifts in an early medieval economy that was still dominated more by gift than by trade.

My insistence on marriage as gift is at odds with the widely held idea of early medieval marriage as commodity exchange,⁴⁹ derived from the work of such venerable figures as Bronisław Malinowski and Claude Lévi-Strauss, whose view of women in the pre-modern cultures they studied as ‘the passive objects of exchange processes between men’ without ‘any subjectivity of their own’ has come to be seen as antiquated by more recent anthropologists.⁵⁰ For our purposes, whether a thing is a ‘commodity’ is determined not by the fact of its being exchanged, even for money, but rather by the kind of relationship its exchange creates. In a classic study of gender and gift-exchange in Melanesia, Marilyn Strathern draws on the work of C. A. Gregory to distinguish goods, commodities and gifts:

. . . the category goods implies a subjective relation between an individual and an object of desire—goods are pre-defined as things that people want. Categories such as commodity and gift refer instead to the organization of relations. Commodity exchange, as [Gregory] puts it, establishes a relationship between the objects exchanged, whereas gift exchange establishes a relationship between the exchanging subjects. In a commodity oriented economy, people thus experience their interest in commodities as a desire to appropriate goods; in a gift oriented economy, the desire is to expand social relations.⁵¹

Strathern and Gregory’s definitions agree well with the common understanding of these words. A commodity is a thing on which one can hang a

⁴⁹ Anglo-Saxonists describing women as ‘commodities’ include Overing, *Language, Sign, and Gender*, p. 121: “masculine economy” denotes the social and material conditions of patriarchy, in which women may be construed as commodities in the system of change and exchange of power relations between men”; Bennett, ‘Exile and the Semiosis of Gender’, p. 49: ‘Using Lévi-Strauss, Lacan argues that, within this order, woman, as a commodity of exchange, is a signified without a signifier, analogous to a “zero-symbol”’; Fee, “Beag” & “beaghroden”, p. 285: ‘Such women [those who are “married off”] serve, in effect, as commodities which are exchanged in order to safeguard a particular social or political agenda’; Dockray-Miller, *Motherhood and Mothering*, p. 85: ‘While most women are commodities, “the gold-adorned queens who circulate among the warriors as visible treasure,” Modþryðo refuses to become one’; Horner, *Discourse of Enclosure*, p. 95: “Peace-weaving” as an anthropological system transacts women as commodities within a homosocial economy.’

⁵⁰ Komter, ‘Women, Gifts and Power’, p. 120.

⁵¹ *Gender of the Gift*, p. 143.

price-tag marked with an amount of money which establishes its relationship to other commodities. Its being exchanged, either for money or for other things, creates no relationship between the parties to the exchange. A gift, on the other hand, is defined not by whether one pays for it (as has often been pointed out—e.g. above, pp. 54–57 and 80—one always does), but rather by whether it creates a relationship between those who exchange it.

When one exchanges a commodity for money or other commodities, whatever tenuous connection it had with the original owner is broken. A human being can only be commodified by being violently torn from family and community: this is the condition of the slave, as every American schoolchild knows, having been taught that one of the greatest horrors of the slave trade was the owners' often selling their slaves, completely and permanently severing every connection they had to other people. Being so cut off was a kind of death, and according to some worse than death: one abolitionist source reported, 'This expression is common, that they had rather hear that their friends are dead, than that they are sold down the river.'⁵²

In the Melanesian cultures that Strathern studies, this is not the condition of women, though they are, by any reasonable definition of the term, oppressed: 'Melanesian women cannot be analyzed as commodities in men's exchanges for the obvious reason that these societies do not constitute commodity economies.'⁵³ Further, women are not objectified by being exchanged in marriage: they retain their 'subjectivity', are not deprived of 'autonomy' (p. 331).

⁵² *Slavery and the Internal Slave Trade*, p. 49. For slavery as the severing of connections and as death, see Graeber, *Debt: The First 5,000 Years*, passim, but especially ch. 6: 'they had been forcibly removed from all those networks of mutual obligation and debt in which ordinary people acquired their outward identities. This was why they could be bought and sold.' And *ibid.* ch. 7: 'Slavery is the ultimate form of being ripped from one's context, and thus from all the social relationships that make one a human being. Another way to put this is that the slave is, in a very real sense, dead.'

⁵³ *Gender of the Gift*, p. 314. On the oppression of women, see p. 325: 'They [men] demand obedience, roughride women's concerns, strike and beat their bodies.'

Strathern's work has not been without critics;⁵⁴ further, one can go only so far in comparing Melanesia and Anglo-Saxon England: the analogies must inevitably break down. Yet it seems valid enough to suggest that women exchanged in marriage in early medieval societies were no more commodities than they are in Melanesia, despite the fact that a bride-price was given in a transaction described by the verb *bycgan* 'buy'. The function of marriage, especially at the top of the political hierarchy, is to create relationships, and that defines marriage as gift (indeed, the Old English word for 'wedding' is *gift*). Finally, being given as a gift, even when the primary beneficiaries of the exchange are men, need not entail that removal from roots and context which constitutes the commodity; indeed the whole point of a political marriage is lost if the woman is cut off from her family and so objectified and commodified.

Though our information for much of the period is sketchy, it is impossible to look at queens like Eanfled (who persuaded Oswiu to build a monastery in penance for his murder of Oswine, *HE* iii.24) or the influential Emma, twice queen of England,⁵⁵ and conclude that they had lost their subjectivity by virtue of being exchanged in marriage. In *Beowulf*, when Wealhtheow says, *druncne dryhtguman dōð swā ic bidde* 'the retainers, having drunk, do as I tell them' (1231), there is no reason to doubt that what she says is true, and Hygd, after the death of Higelac, is in a position to offer Beowulf *hord ond rice, bēagas ond bregostol* 'treasury and kingdom, rings and throne' (2369–70). These queens are subordinate figures, but they are not commodities and not without power; their condition is far above that of the slave.

With the gift of a queen, a king both acquires and confers honour, but more significantly, he imposes obligation and defines his relationship with the recipient as that of an overlord. The position of the royal father-in-law is similar to that of a godparent, sponsorship being another peacemaking manoeuvre that works by creating a hierarchical kinship-like relationship. Our best example is Alfred's sponsorship of the viking king Guthrum,

⁵⁴ E.g. Biersack, 'Thinking Difference'; Graeber, *Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value*, pp. 35–47.

⁵⁵ See the 'Introduction to the 1998 Reprint' in Campbell and Keynes, *Encomium Emmae reginae*, pp. xiii–lxxxvi and Stafford, *Queen Emma and Queen Edith*.

whom he had defeated at Edington in 878:

Onð þā salde se here him foregīslas onð micle āþas þæt hīe of his rīce uuol-
don, onð him ēac gehēton þæt hiera kyning fulwihte onfōn wolde, onð hīe
þæt gelæston swā. Onð þæs ymb .iii. wiecan cōm se cyning tō him Godrum
þrītiga sum þāra monna þe in þām here weorþuste wāron æt Alre, onð þæt
is wiþ Eþelinggaeige, onð his se cyning þær onfēng æt fulwihte, onð his
crismlising was æt Weþmor, onð hē was .xii. niht mid þām cyninge, onð hē
hine miclum onð his gefēran mid fēo weorðude. (ASC A)

And then the viking army gave him prominent hostages and great oaths that they would leave his kingdom, and also promised him that their king would accept baptism, and they followed through with that. And three weeks later King Guthrum came to him at Aller, which is near Athelney, in a company of thirty of those who were worthiest in the army; and the king received him there in baptism, and his chrisom-loosing was at Wedmore, and he was with the king for twelve nights, and he [Alfred] honoured him and his companions greatly with goods.

Alfred's sponsorship of Guthrum is easy to understand as confirming his own superiority, a relationship established in battle.⁵⁶ The gifts mentioned in the account both express this superiority (the exchanges are not mutual, but it is Alfred who gives) and impose obligation. The gift of a woman works the same way in Dudo's account of Gisla's marriage: though Dudo tries to limit the sense that Rollo is subordinate to Charles (adding the puerile trick of his flipping the king over backwards rather than kissing his foot), it is perfectly clear that in the ceremony where the two make peace Rollo pledges fealty to the king. The gift of Gisla is a subordinating gesture, as any valuable gift would be.

Turning back to the marriage of Freawaru, it is not difficult to discover signs that she is also being sent from a dominant to a subordinate group. In the scene imagined by Beowulf, we learn the history of the sword worn by the young Dane who provokes the fury of the old Heathobard (above, p. 63):

⁵⁶ For discussion of this and several other instances of diplomacy by sponsorship in Anglo-Saxon England, see Lynch, *Christianizing Kinship*, pp. 205–28.

on him gladiað gomelra lāfe
 heard ond hringmæl, Heaðabeardna gestrēon
 þenden hīe ðām wæpnum wealdan mōston,
 oððæt hīe forlæddan tō ðām lindplegan
 swāse gesīðas ond hyra sylfra feorh. (2036–40)

on him glitter the heirlooms of the elders,
 hard and adorned with rings, the property of the Heathobards
 while they could wield those weapons,
 until they misled their dear companions
 and their own lives into the shield-play.

The language is a bit obscure, and yet it is clear that going to battle against the Danes was a bad idea that cost many lives, including that of their king, Ingeld's father Froda. It was certainly a catastrophic defeat for the Heathobards, and there is no reason to think that anything has since happened to put them on equal terms with the Danes. When we bear this in mind, Freawaru's marriage looks quite different from what we imagined when we thought of her as the ideal Victorian queen whose sole concern was peace. Her role, rather, is to be an ambassador of Danish power and a foreign intervention in the Heathobard court, a material reminder of obligations owed primarily by Ingeld to Hrothgar and not the other way around. The armed Danish retinue that accompanies her into the hall—quite different from Wealhtheow's company of ladies (924)—is not merely decorative: it is a projection of the power that she represents. And the old Heathobard who incites his young companion is not only thinking of the one man who lost his sword and his life in battle, but also nursing bitter memories of national defeat.

The Freawaru episode makes the problems with our third answer obvious. Any gift can provoke resentment: as an Inuit hunter once said to a Danish visitor in indignation at being thanked for some meat, 'by gifts one makes slaves and by whips one makes dogs'.⁵⁷ The resentment is likely to be all the greater when the gift is calculated to remind a king of his humiliation: no surprise that in our list of marriages that might have accompanied peace agreements (above, p. 156), several ended badly, in separation or

⁵⁷ Graeber, *Debt: The First 5,000 Years*, ch. 4.

murder. No matter how graciously a queen like Freawaru behaves, pouring out mead for her lord and being *lēohtmōd* and *rūmheort*, she is unlikely ever to be *lēof* (above, p. 131). When she gives gifts, after all, can anyone be sure on whose behalf she is imposing obligation? And when she offers sage advice, can they be sure whose interests she is serving?

Beowulf itself is sufficient evidence that early medieval kings and their subjects were well aware of the difficulties with all three of our rationales for the peace marriage. Perhaps it was thought sufficient that political marriage, like other peacemaking techniques (hostage-giving, oath-taking, godparenting, payment of compensation and tribute) should work for a little while. No one seems to have expected that earthly peace, like the heavenly peace that everyone hoped for, would last forever.

CHAPTER SIX

The Perils of Peacemaking

TOO MUCH BROODING over our inadequate scraps of evidence for the Finn tale has been one of the most unprofitable and time-consuming occupations of *Beowulf* scholars', wrote Dorothy Whitelock of the song performed by Hrothgar's *scop* during the celebration in Heorot after Grendel's defeat.¹ Whitelock's observation seems as true now as sixty years ago, and it is no surprise, for the narrative gaps and difficult readings in the textual record invite speculation and conjectural emendation. Our stock of heroic narrative from the early Middle Ages being meagre, the temptation is all the greater to complete the story by all means fair and foul.²

Evidence for the Finnesburh story comes from two sources: one is the so-called 'Finn episode' of *Beowulf* (1066–1159), which tells the story in an allusive and riddling fashion; the other is an Old English poem, *The Battle of Finnesburh*, which appears once to have contained a fuller and more intelligible version of the story but unfortunately survives only in a fragment of forty-eight lines represented by a poor early modern transcript, the original manuscript having been mislaid.³

Little in the story has been agreed upon by all scholars, but many, perhaps most, would accept the following summary: Hnæf, a Danish king, is

¹ *The Audience of Beowulf*, p. 19.

² Book-length studies of the story include Fry, *Finnsburh: Fragment and Episode* and Tolkien's posthumous *Finn and Hengest*. The major editions of *Beowulf* also contain editions of *The Battle of Finnesburh* and useful comment.

³ Finn and Hnæf are also mentioned in *Widsith* ll. 27 and 29, but this source does not otherwise contribute to our knowledge of their story.

visiting Finn, king of the Frisians, who is married to Hnæf's sister Hildeburh, when a fight breaks out between the two kings. At the battle's end, Hnæf is dead along with at least one of Hildeburh's sons, and Finn's force is so depleted that it can neither finish off the pitiful remnants of Hnæf's force nor expel them. Finn offers terms to Hengest, who now leads the Danish party: Hengest and his men are to be treated as if they were Finn's thegns, being given gifts every day. Finn swears an oath to Hengest that is intended to prevent the renewal of hostilities through inflammatory talk. Hildeburh orders that her son(s) be cremated on the same pyre as Hnæf, and she mourns as this is done. The Frisian warriors (all, some or most of them—we are not told) go home, and Hengest winters over with Finn. When spring arrives, Hengest thinks of returning home, but even more of revenge. He finally takes action after a Danish warrior places a sword on his lap and others complain of their sorrows: he and his men kill Finn, loot his dwelling, and carry all his belongings, and also Hildeburh, back to Denmark.

Readers acquainted with the textual and interpretive difficulties of *Beowulf* will recognize that this summary ignores several problems. Their solutions (if I had any to offer) would add little to this chapter's argument, and so I am very glad to avoid agonizing over them unprofitably. I will say nothing about how Hildeburh has come to be married to Finn: the popular notion that her marriage was intended to patch up an old quarrel is pure guesswork, since no source says a word on the subject. It seems equally pointless to guess at the cause of the first fight at Finnesburh: it could just as well be a longstanding enmity or a recent squabble over seating arrangements in the hall.⁴ I will make no attempt to sort out the role of the *Ēotan* (usually translated 'Jutes'), who are mentioned several times and may be Frisians or a third group whose part in the drama is a mystery. I will sidestep the problem of whether Hengest could sail home during the winter if he wanted: lines 1130–1 say that he could, but editors have sometimes emended to make them say he could not. And finally I will

⁴ On contention over seating arrangements in the sagas, see W. I. Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, pp. 29–30. Seating arrangements are also significant in *Beowulf* (see above, p. 69).

have nothing to say about whether *Hūnlāfing* (1143) is the name of the sword placed in Hengest's lap or a patronymic ('son of Hunlaf') referring to the Danish warrior who performs this act: good arguments have been advanced on both sides. This chapter will be unable to avoid addressing a couple of textual problems, but one hopes it can be done without too much brooding.

Although the Finnesburh story begins and ends with slaughter, the *Beowulf* poet seems curiously uninterested in the action. He does not describe the first battle, but only its consequences; at the episode's end we hear only that sword-bale comes to Finn and all his goods are carried off. Comparison with *The Battle of Finnesburh*, which narrates the first battle, reveals how radically different the two poets' interests are. The fragment is brisk and full of action; it focuses on what people do and say and does not bother with what they think. The episode, by contrast, is intensely interested in the characters' circumstances, thoughts and feelings. It reports no speeches, and the narrative is quiet: it tells of Hildeburh's losses, the negotiation between Finn and Hengest, the preparation of the pyre, Hildeburh's mourning at the funeral, the burning of the bodies, the coming of winter and spring, the incitement to battle, and finally, in a few lines at the end, the killing and looting. The atmosphere is tense, brooding, expectant.

To explain the thematic appropriateness of the Finn episode, critics have often pointed to the prominence of women in this section of the poem: Wealhtheow makes several appearances here (923–4, 1162–91, 1215–31); an attack by Grendel's vengeful mother is imminent; and Hildeburh is a major figure in the Finn episode.⁵ In his valuable introduction to the fragment and episode, Donald K. Fry hints at another way the episode fits in its place:

The hall has suffered from the wrestling of Beowulf and Grendel. . . . And though Grendel to all appearances seems dead, no one has seen the corpse,

⁵ The recognition of a link between the Finn episode and the situation of Wealhtheow is old: W. W. Lawrence writes in 1928, 'May it not be, too, that the story of Queen Hildeburg was here designedly brought into connection with the tragedy in store for Queen Wealhtheow, which must have been well known to the people for whom the poet of *Beowulf* wrote?' (*Beowulf and Epic Tradition*, p. 126).

and monsters have a habit of reappearing at the worst moment.

In this hall and in this uneasy circumstance, the scop sings of Finnsburg
...⁶

As Beowulf himself recognizes, a complete corpse would have spoken more eloquently of victory than an arm (above, p. 40); the poet has told us that Grendel is dead and in hell, but the Danes have no such assurance. They have other anxieties, too: Wealhtheow worries openly about the implications of Beowulf's visit for the Danish succession (above, pp. 68–70), and there are dark hints of future strife within the royal family (1163–5). Their situation, indeed, is even worse than they know, for they have no idea that an avenger is waiting for the right moment to attack. They are living the theme of the entertainment they have just enjoyed—a tale not of action, but rather of a tense period of illusory peace, a brief lull between action and reaction.⁷

Analogues and issues

Looking at the Finn episode as the story of a failed attempt to settle a dispute, situated between two fights, one finds a different set of analogues from those concerning tragically wronged queens, intra-familial strife or simple revenge. One such analogue, pointed out by Dorothy Whitelock,⁸ is preserved in an eleventh-century account of the siege of Durham, *De obsessione Dunelmi*. In this story, set in the early eleventh century, Aldred, earl of Northumbria, kills one Thurbrand by way of avenging his father's death. Thurbrand's son Carl attempts to take revenge, and for some time each plots against the other.

Tandem amicorum instantia reducti in concordiam, alterna sese satisfactione mediantibus amicis placabant: atque adeo in amorem alterutrum sunt

⁶ *Finnsburh: Fragment and Episode*, pp. 12–3.

⁷ Lockett, 'The Role of Grendel's Arm', approaching from a different angle (focusing especially on the display of Grendel's arm), also recognizes that the scene depicts a 'period of suspense between violent exchanges' (i. 369).

⁸ *The Audience of Beowulf*, pp. 16–8.

adunati, ut fratres adiurati Romam simul tenderent. Sed diutina maris tempestate impediti, coeptum iter relinquentes domum sunt reuersi. Carl magnifice satis et accurate comitem suscepit in domum suam, sed post exhibita conuiuia, dum eum nihil mali suspicantem quasi honoris gratia deduceret, in silua quae Risewde uocatur, interfecit.⁹

At last, having been brought into agreement at the urging of their friends, they were reconciled by friendly mediators and mutual compensation; and they were so far united in friendship to each other that as sworn brothers they planned to go together to Rome. But hindered for a long time by a tempest at sea, they abandoned their intended journey and returned home. Carl received the earl into his house with great magnificence and attentiveness, but after he had entertained him at a banquet, while misleading him (who suspected no evil) into thinking it was for his honour, killed him in a forest called Risewood.

In a strikingly similar story told by Gregory of Tours (*HF* vii.47 and ix.19), Sichari has killed the father, brother and uncle of one Chramnesind. Gregory attempts to mediate a settlement, even offering Church property for the compensation, but Chramnesind refuses to settle; and, when a false rumour reaches him that Sichari is dead, he loots and burns his house, killing some slaves. Because of this action, the compensation due to Chramnesind is halved by a magistrate; but the parties are reconciled and peace is established with swearing of oaths. Time passes, and Sichari and Chramnesind become fast friends. But one day, while Sichari is dining at Chramnesind's house, he gets drunk and starts to boast:

Magnas mihi debes referre grates, o dulcissime frater, eo quod interfecerim parentes tuos, de quibus accepta compositione, aurum argentumque superabundat in domum tuam, et nudus nunc essis et egens, nisi haec te causa paululum roborassit.

You should really thank me, sweet brother, for killing your relations, for since you received the compensation for them, there has been plenty of gold and silver in your house; and you would be naked and poor if this affair hadn't built you up a little.

⁹ Arnold, *Symeonis Monachi Opera Omnia*, p. 219.

Gregory reports (or more likely imagines) Chramnesind's thoughts on hearing this: *nisi ulciscar interitum parentum meorum, amittere nomen uiri debeo et mulier infirma uocari* 'unless I avenge the death of my relations, I ought to let go the name of a man and be called a weak woman' (*ibid.*). Whereupon he splits open Sichari's head, strips his corpse, and hangs it, naked, on a fencepost. He is able to save his life and property by throwing himself on the king's mercy.

These stories are episodes in much longer narratives.¹⁰ In a sense their being retold here with little context is appropriate as modelling the situation in *Beowulf*, where we are never given much context for the disputes the poem mentions. We cannot say precisely why various nations—Danes and Frisians, Danes and Heathobards, Geats and Swedes, Geats and Franks—are at odds with each other. Where some provocation is mentioned, such as Higelac's ill-considered raid in Frisia (2910–21) or the attacks on Geatish territory by the sons of Ongentheow (2475–8), we have no grounds for ruling out the existence of some even older grievance. The poet traces the enmity between Grendel's kin and God's allies all the way back to Cain's killing of Abel; but this is as much as to say that the monsters descended from Cain have always been at war with mankind. Likewise the nations of *Beowulf* seem always to have been at war with each other. Indeed, it is the assumption of the *Beowulf* poet that strife has been pervasive in human society since the very first act of violence. As *Maxims I* says (eloquently despite some textual corruption):

Wearð fæhþo fyra cynne sibþan furþum swealg
 eorðe Ābeles blōde. Næs þæt āndæge nīð:
 of þām wrōhtdropan wīde gesprungon,
 micel mōn ældum, monegum þēodum
 bealoblonden nīþ. Slōg his brōðor swæsne
 Cain, †þone cwealm neredet. Cūþ wæs wīde sibþan
 þæt ēce nīð ældum scōd †swā aþolwarum†.
 Drugon wāpnas gewin wīde geond eorþan,

¹⁰ The full tale of the Northumbrian feud is told entertainingly for a general audience by Fletcher, *Bloodfeud*; and see also the study by C. J. Morris, *Marriage and Murder*. Gregory's story is discussed at length by Halsall, 'Violence and Society'.

āhogodan ond āhyrdon heoro sliþendne. (193–200)

There has been strife among mankind since earth first
 swallowed Abel's blood. That was not a one-day dispute:
 from that strife-drops splattered widely,
 great evil to men, enmity mixed with malice
 for many nations. Cain, †whom death protected†,
 slew his own brother. Then it was widely known
 that continuous enmity injured men †as dwellers in infirmity†:
 They carried on the contest of weapons all over the world,
 pondered and tempered the wounding blade.

Most residents of modern industrialized societies would not accept the idea that violence is an unavoidable and indeed normal aspect of life; yet as this study has repeatedly stated, people in the Middle Ages saw violence as a reasonable way to resolve disputes, even if not the best way (and it was preferable, to be sure, not to be involved in a dispute at all).

Anthropologists have long recognized that disputes are pervasive in human societies; some also argue that they can be constructive as well as destructive. Be that as it may, it is easy to see that disputes are fundamental to the way societies organize themselves. In a democracy an election is structured as a dispute, and issues of public policy are routinely decided by adversarial means. But many societies make their important decisions through disputes. Speaking of the Ndembu of Zambia, Simon Roberts writes:

Among them, while the headmanship of a village may be confined to a group of matrilineal kinsmen, there are no rules identifying which particular person should succeed, with the result that individual members of the lineage are left to compete among themselves for the headmanship. Bitter quarrels typify this competition, and while these die down once a new headman is established, they inevitably flare up again as he grows old and loses his grip on the community.¹¹

The situation of the Ndembu is similar to that in Anglo-Saxon England, where several persons could be qualified to succeed to the kingship by virtue of membership in a particular kinship group, but the kingship did not

¹¹ *Order and Dispute*, p. 34.

by rule pass from father to eldest son.¹² Disputed succession was common, and contestants for the throne frequently resorted to warfare and murder. The very idea of succession in Anglo-Saxon England included the expectation of dispute and violence.

In heroic literature the constructiveness of dispute is visible at another level: in *Waltharius*, the first two thirds of *Beowulf* and the story of Sigurð's slaying of Fafnir in the *Völsunga Saga*—tales of the rise of young men to heroic stature—the acquisition of honour and wealth through the violent resolution of disputes is fundamental to the construction of the self. The situation described in such works is a simplified and idealized version of what historians have observed: the monarchs and nobles of northern Europe were fighters whose status in society was determined in large part by their war-making prowess. This point needs little elaboration here, as it is implicit everywhere in this study so far; John M. Hill has illustrated it well in his essay on Wiglaf, whose participation in the dragon fight constitutes him as a warrior.¹³

Disputes and methods of settling them are always governed by well defined rules and customs.¹⁴ In the Finn episode and the two analogues we see a negotiation, an exchange of wealth, the taking of oaths, a provocation or incitement (we must imagine this in the case of Aldred and Carl) and the taking of revenge. These are among the elements in the ritual of the dispute, and we find them frequently in other texts—for example, in the Icelandic sagas. In our two analogues we can also see some of the societal machinery that enforces rule and custom: pressure applied by friends in the case of Aldred and Carl, and by the Church, a magistrate and ultimately

¹² For an overview of succession in the various early kingdoms, see Yorke, *Kings and Kingdoms*, pp. 34–5, 67–9, 88–9, 117–8, 142–50; in the ninth century West Saxon practices developed in a way that promoted stability, but nowhere in Anglo-Saxon England do we find a system resembling primogeniture; see Dumville, 'The Ætheling'; Abels, 'Royal Succession'.

¹³ *Anglo-Saxon Warrior Ethic*, pp. 19–46.

¹⁴ Medieval historians have produced an extensive and stimulating literature on the subject. See, e.g., the collections Bossy, *Disputes and Settlements*; Davies and Fouracre, *Settlement of Disputes*; Halsall, *Violence and Society*; Brown and Górecki, *Conflict in Medieval Europe*; Drake, *Violence in Late Antiquity* and Tuten and Billado, *Feud, Violence and Practice*.

the king and queen in the case of Sichari and Chramnesind. The people who become involved—some of them volunteers, others officials wielding governmental power—are engaged in judging the rights and wrongs of cases, setting the level of compensation and facilitating the solemnizing of settlements by the taking of oaths.

In the story of Sichari and Chramnesind we glimpse a state apparatus that has the power to set levels of compensation and enforce agreements. In the story of Aldred and Carl such an apparatus is at least implicitly present—Aldred is an earl answerable to King Æthelræd—but royal power must have seemed a distant rumour to a Northumbrian noble of this time. In the Iceland of the sagas, various courts have the ability to decide guilt, assign compensation and impose the penalty of outlawry. But what mechanisms are available to constrain the actions of kings, who by definition are answerable to no one? The space in which they compete for honour would seem, at a glance at least, to be subject to no rules. The society of kings is stateless.

Though some historians have seen such societies as the ‘stateless’ France of the eleventh century as anarchic, not all see them that way. Here is Patrick Geary:

To assert the absence of a public court system with recognized jurisdiction is not to say that society existed in a state of anarchy. Groups and individuals belonged to a society and a culture that were remarkably homogeneous, and within this homogeneous system, they dealt with their conflictual relationships according to a complex of shared values and implicit rules.¹⁵

Fredric L. Cheyette argues that the ‘stateless’ condition of eleventh-century France was nothing new:

[T]he ‘stateless’ society of the eleventh century did not suddenly appear around the year 1000; it had already existed for half a millennium. For a brief time it was overlaid with the powers and the wealth-redistribution networks of the Carolingian court and the imaginings of public authority that Carolingian intellectuals produced, but that overlay was thin and fragile. . . . Carolingian practices neither suppressed pre-Carolingian practices nor, in

¹⁵ *Living with the Dead*, p. 145.

all likelihood, seriously modified them. This 'stateless' society was not, however, a state of anarchy, for it had its own ways of maintaining a modicum of order.¹⁶

Throughout the Middle Ages, states were able only intermittently and imperfectly to extend their authority so far as to supplant private mechanisms for handling disputes, including those involving violence. Courts of law were for the wealthy, and in many circumstances optional even for them; for every dispute that was litigated, many were mediated less formally, especially by members of the local gentry or clergy.¹⁷ In this sense, the case of Aldred and Carl looks more typical than that of Sichari and Chramnesind. It also looks more like a dispute between kings than like one between subjects.

Kings at odds

Gregory of Tours (*HF* ii.32–3) tells the story of the Burgundian king Gundobad, who, in a drive to secure sole rule for himself, has already killed one brother and a sister-in-law. The kingdom is now divided between Gundobad and his surviving brother Godegisil, and each is ambitious to kill the other. Godegisil makes an alliance with the Frankish king Clovis and surprises his brother with that fact as he turns against him suddenly on the battlefield, joins forces with Clovis, and wins a victory that ends with Gundobad cornered in Avignon. At this point an advisor of Gundobad's named Aridius volunteers to go to Clovis, pretend to be on his side, and arrange a peace; the outcome is that Gundobad saves his life by agreeing to pay Clovis an annual tribute. He hands over the first year's instalment, but as soon as he considers himself strong enough he stops paying, pursues Godegisil to Vienne, and kills him there.

In Gregory's telling, Gundobad is an unruly character, a man to whom even fratricide comes easily;¹⁸ like the *ójafnaðarmenn* of Icelandic saga, he

¹⁶ 'Some Reflections', p. 258.

¹⁷ For a stimulating account of the growth of reliance on the courts for settling disputes in the early modern period, see Ruff, *Violence in Early Modern Europe*, pp. 73–116.

¹⁸ Other writers saw him differently: see Kershaw, *Peaceful Kings*, pp. 83–7.

does not consider himself bound by certain conventions—as, say, that one should honour agreements and refrain from killing kinsmen. This is not to say that his behaviour is ungoverned by rules, though, any more than that of the *ójafnaðarmaðr*, who follows the rulebook of the battlefield rather than that of the private negotiation or the court (above, pp. 73–6). Up to a point, the dealings between Gundobad and Clovis look like those in the other analogues we have seen so far, though Gregory (understandably, given the outcome) doubts Aridius's honesty. The point where the narratives diverge is Gundobad's decision to stop paying. Tribute is a kind of anti-gift, which drains the giver's treasury of both wealth and honour. It is also a lexeme in the language of political relationships: given, it expresses weakness and submission; withheld, it proclaims strength and integrity. There is no record of Clovis's having pursued the matter of Gundobad's tribute; presumably he understood well the message that Gundobad was sending in withholding it, and he decided that to go after it would not be cost-effective.

The little saga of Cynewulf and Cyneheard, embedded in several manuscripts of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* under the year 755 (an error for 757), has yet more to teach us about wealth and negotiation in the stateless space at the top of the political hierarchy. The story begins in 757, when Cynewulf and the West Saxon *witan* depose Sigebryht *for unryhtum dædum* 'because of his unjust deeds'. The annal does not say what terrible things Sigebryht has done, and we probably oughtn't to assume too much:¹⁹ Cynewulf reigns until 786, time enough for a narrative concerning the justice of his succession to become firmly established, whatever the facts of the case. For our purposes the important point is that Cynewulf manages to secure the support of almost the whole of the West Saxon ruling class (*būton Hamtūnsċīre* 'except for Hampshire'), and this is enough to make him king.

The *Chronicle* does not say why, after a long reign, Cynewulf attempts

¹⁹ The analysis of the opening part of this annal by Hill, *Anglo-Saxon Warrior Ethic*, pp. 76–81, is interesting and worthwhile. Hill sees Sigebryht as 'a type of Heremod' (p. 79). Heremod himself may conform to a conventional type of the bad king, to which even historical narratives could easily be attracted.

to exile Sigebryht's brother Cyneheard: presumably this *æþeling* 'prince' is showing signs of restlessness. It is easy to guess that Cyneheard has been nursing a grudge and a sense of entitlement for a long time; now Cynewulf is an old king, and the rise of Offa of Mercia, partly at West Saxon expense, must be having consequences for his ability to reward his followers.²⁰ Sensing an opening, Cyneheard has, it seems, persuaded some of the West Saxon nobility that their lot will improve under a new king. When word reaches him that Cynewulf is at Merton with only a few men, Cyneheard makes his move, laying siege to the *būr* (some kind of outbuilding, it seems) where the king is at that moment enjoying the last sexual encounter of his life.

Killing a king is not enough to make one a king; it is necessary in addition to secure the support of the leading men of the realm, as Cynewulf did in 757. When Cynewulf's men rush out (too late) to do battle, *hiera se æþeling gehwelcūm feoh ond feorh gebēad, ond hiera nānig hit gepicgean nolde* 'the prince [Cyneheard] offered each of them property and life, and none of them would accept it'. Rolf Bremmer has argued that Cyneheard, 'assuming royal pretensions', is in effect offering amnesty for rebellion against the rightful king: he will allow them to live and keep their property.²¹ This seems right; but there is more to it. Accepting the offer, Cynewulf's men would become Cyneheard's men and recipients of his gifts, with all that implies in opportunities for enhanced wealth and honour. There is no reason to doubt that Cyneheard would show these men great favour if they were to join his cause at this early and critical point in his campaign for the throne.

The offer of *feoh ond feorh* is not an outrageous one. Certainly to refuse is the more honourable choice: it is difficult enough to make peace with a killer while the victim's corpse is still warm, and on the evidence of this narrative and the Finnesburh episode, to follow the killer of one's lord would seem to be all but unthinkable. Yet it is not hard to find stories of men doing exactly that, though these are not the stuff of heroic

²⁰ For relations between Mercia and Wessex at this time see, e.g., Williams, *Kingship and Government*, pp. 27–8.

²¹ 'Germanic Context', pp. 456–61.

narrative, and possibly more often related of people on the other side of a cultural boundary than of one's own. In Saxo's *Gesta Danorum*, Frothi III kills the Slavic king Strumic *cum gentis suae fortissimis* 'along with the strongest of his people', but accepts the submission of his surviving warriors. The opinionated Saxo passes no judgement on this shift of allegiance, though he does relate with obvious relish the execution of large numbers of Strumic's people after Frothi tricks them into confessing to robbery and theft.²² The *Annals of St-Bertin* for 839 tell that the Saxons fought the Colodici at Kesigesburch (Cösitz) and, *caelestibus auxiliis fulti* 'thanks to heavenly help', slew their king. A new king (presumably one acceptable to the victors) was hastily installed, oaths taken, hostages given.²³ The story is not stirring or even particularly interesting, and Frankish historians seem to hear nothing more from this particular group; but that is precisely the point. The survivors, it seems, followed their new king and did what people are very good at doing: they adjusted to their new reality, got on with their lives, and caused no more trouble.

That chroniclers and others should occasionally write down stories like these is no surprise. The tales that early medieval audiences loved so well achieve their effect in part by reminding us that the heroic choice is the harder one: the flights of the cowards in *The Battle of Maldon* and in the dragon episode of *Beowulf* are essential contrapuntal elements of these narratives, making those who fight seem all the greater. The unheroic warriors of these poems had no shortage of real-world analogues, as one can easily demonstrate by searching out forms of *flēon* 'flee' and *būgan* 'submit' in the *Chronicle*. It is hard ideological work to persuade people that giving up their lives voluntarily is the right thing to do. Cynewulf's men were brought up on stories like those of the heroic last stands of Beowulf (see Chapter Seven) and Hrólfr Kraki²⁴—but so were many like, say, those Norwegians of the reign of Harald Fairhair who neither resisted his aggressive advance nor emigrated to Iceland, but rather shifted their

²² V.iv.4; J. Olrik and Ræder, *Saxonis Gesta Danorum*, i.127.

²³ Waitz, *Annales Bertiniani*, p. 23; Nelson, *Annals of St-Bertin*, p. 48.

²⁴ Slay, *Hrólfs Saga Kraka*, pp. 111–25; Byock, *Saga of King Hrolf Kraki*, pp. 70–8.

allegiance *ok byggðu lǫnd með honum* 'and dwelt in the land with him'.²⁵ Royal favour can be a great consolation to one whose honour has taken a hit.

On the other hand, any of this first group of Cynewulf's men who pauses to calculate the real value of Cyneheard's offer is likely to conclude that it is not much to his advantage. Cyneheard may have 'royal pretensions', but from any point of view but his own he is not king yet: what he is promising comes from reserves of power and property that he does not yet control, and his ability to make good depends on the success of his bid for the throne. If he fails, then anyone who has accepted his offer is sure to die with the reputation of having followed his lord's killer. Cynewulf's men must be aware that a larger force is on the way; they cannot know for certain whether Cyneheard has managed to suborn their comrades, but the offer he has made is a pretty good sign that he has not. He needs their support urgently to help him persuade the others to join him and, if that fails, to help him fight. His offer of wealth, in short, is made from a position of weakness,²⁶ and so the choice that faces Cynewulf's men is between the certainty of an honourable death today and the probability of a dishonourable death tomorrow.

In these circumstances, their refusal of Cyneheard's offer of peace is not only heroic, but also rational, even though it leads inevitably to their deaths. Cyneheard, unable to settle with Cynewulf's men, has no choice but to fight them; they seem to be badly outnumbered, and all of them except for one British hostage meet their end. For Cyneheard this is not the best possible outcome. Worse, it is a disaster that seals his fate: from this moment he is doomed.

The decision of Cynewulf's men to fight (and die) rather than make peace constrains the choices of survivors on both sides of the conflict. For the second group of Cynewulf's men, who arrive the next day, their comrades' decision makes it all but impossible for them to settle. If the second group already leans toward the view that it is their duty to avenge their

²⁵ Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, *Heimskringla*, p. 118.

²⁶ Bremmer notes Cyneheard's 'superior strategic position' ('Germanic Context', p. 460). I would say, rather, that his superiority is purely tactical; his strategic position has been weak from the start.

king, the deaths of so many of his men must make that duty look all the more compelling; and if the first group made the more honourable choice when the cost of doing so was high, how can the second group choose differently when they seem to have the upper hand?

Cyneheard now makes a desperate offer: *hiera āgenne dōm fēos ond londes* ‘their own judgement of property and land’ if they will grant him the kingdom. The offer resembles Gundobad’s offer of tribute in that it is made from a position of weakness rather than strength and diminishes rather than increases his stock of honour.²⁷ He invites Cynewulf’s men to name their own price, and even so this offer is as bad as his earlier one. If they accept, Cyneheard will make them all rich, but they must discount for the loss of honour in following their lord’s killer; if, on the other hand, they kill Cyneheard instead, they will receive the honour that comes from taking revenge, and this honour will surely be monetized by whoever the new king turns out to be. The correct choice for them is obvious.

The way the deaths of Cynewulf’s men constrain the choices of Cyneheard’s men has not been widely understood, mainly because most editors and translators have misunderstood the following passage, which describes the last part of the negotiation preceding the battle:

Ond þā budon hīe hiera mægum þæt hīe gesunde from ēodon, ond hīe cuædon þæt tæt ilce hiera gefērum geboden wære þe ær mid þām cyninge wæron. Ðā cuædon hīe þæt hīe hīe þæs ne onmunden ‘þon mā þe ēowre gefēran þe mid þām cyninge ofslægene wærun’.

And then they [Cynewulf’s men] offered to their kinsmen that they might go from there unharmed, and they [Cyneheard’s men] said that the same was offered to their companions who had been with the king. Then they [Cyneheard’s men] said that that they did not consider themselves more worthy of that ‘than your companions who were slain with the king’.

²⁷ See also, from a somewhat different perspective, Bremner, ‘Germanic Context’, p. 461, who observes that Cyneheard is no longer in a position to grant life, and his offer of property ‘marks a shifting of initiative from the rebel to the royalists. Finally, the additional condition *gif hie him þæs rices upōn* “if they granted him the kingdom,” abundantly makes clear that Cyneheard is no longer in the superior position he was in when he offered *fēoh and feorh*.’

The common error is to translate *onmunan* (here ‘consider worthy’) as ‘have regard to’, ‘pay attention to’ or the like. For example, Kevin Crossley-Holland translates the second sentence of this passage ‘Moreover they said that they would pay no regard to it, “any more than did your comrades who were slain along with the king”.’²⁸ Crossley-Holland, a fine translator, is not much to blame in this; he merely passes along a misunderstanding that originated in the eleventh century and continued with the earliest editors of the *Chronicle* (see Appendix, pp. 196–199). The popular but incorrect translation of this passage conveys a satisfyingly heroic atmosphere: one imagines the answer as shouted and accompanied by much brandishing of spears. Correctly translated, though, a much more subdued passage reveals that the reason Cyneheard’s men decide not to save their own lives is that they see their situation and their merits as similar to those of Cynewulf’s men who, given the same choice, decided to die. Those men did not only follow their king into death in classic Tacitean fashion;²⁹ they in effect decided how the rest of the drama would unfold. In the response of Cyneheard’s men we read not so much defiance as resignation: it has become impossible for them to survive with their honour intact.

²⁸ *The Anglo-Saxon World: An Anthology*, p. 38.

²⁹ Germania 14: *Iam uero infame in omnem uitam ac probrosum superstitem principi suo ex acie recessisse: illum defendere, tueri, sua quoque fortia facta gloriae eius adsignare praecipuum sacramentum est: principes pro uictoria pugnant, comites pro principe* ‘but to have left the field and survived one’s chief, this means lifelong infamy and shame: to defend and protect him, to devote one’s own feats even to his glorification, this is the gist of their allegiance: the chief fights for victory, but the retainers for the chief’ (Hutton et al., *Tacitus: Agricola, Germania, Dialogus*, pp. 152–3). For a critique of the applicability of this famous statement to Old English literature, see R. Woolf, ‘The Ideal of Men Dying with Their Lord’ and Fanning, ‘Tacitus, *Beowulf*, and the *Comitatus*’; Frank, ‘Ideal of Men Dying with Their Lord’, finds parallels in works at least roughly contemporary with *Maldon*, and Gwara, *Heroic Identity*, pp. 313–24 defends the relevance of Tacitus’s observation to *Maldon* and *Beowulf* primarily by defining the terms broadly.

Peacemaking failures and successes

Cyneheard's attempts to settle with Cynewulf's men and persuade them to make him king fail because they do not see the offers he makes as sufficient to cancel out the cost in honour of following their lord's killer. Chramnesind's concern is with his *nomen*, how he can claim the right to be spoken of—in short his honour. Can he claim the *nomen* of a man or must he settle for that of a woman, a status he thinks inferior? Chramnesind's way of thinking will look familiar to anyone acquainted with Icelandic saga, where men are frequently stirred to action by the threat that people will speak of them as more like women than men (the inciter is often a woman).³⁰ In *Laxdæla Saga*, Porgerð incites her sons to avenge the death of their brother Kjartan Ólafsson with a famous harangue in which she says, among other things, *ok víst ætla ek yðr til þess betr fellda, at þér værið dætr fǫður yðvars ok værið giptar* 'and I for one believe it would have suited you better to have been your father's daughters and been married off'.³¹ Because they can no longer bear their mother's taunts (*sögðusk eigi lengr þola frýju móður sinnar*³²), Porgerð's four sons, together with several allies, kill their foster-brother Bolli Þorleiksson. Bolli's wife Guðrún is able to arrange for vengeance to be taken against one of the attackers, Helgi Harðbeinsson, but not against the Ólafssons. Snorri the Priest finally intervenes to prevent further bloodshed, and the settlement he arranges between the Bollasons and the Ólafssons is never broken.

The author of the saga is careful to account for the success of this settlement. First, Snorri has the trust of people on both sides of the dispute: he has long been a friend of Guðrún and her family, and the Ólafssons are aware that he was responsible for Guðrún's vengeance being directed against Helgi Harðbeinsson instead of themselves. Second, Snorri exerts a good bit of pressure for a settlement, making it clear to everyone that

³⁰ For useful comments on women as inciters in Icelandic saga, see Quinn, 'Women in Old Norse Poetry and Sagas', pp. 528–34 and Jesch, *Women in the Viking Age*, pp. 180–202.

³¹ Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, *Laxdæla Saga*, p. 162; Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson, *Laxdæla Saga*, p. 183.

³² Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, *Laxdæla Saga*, p. 163.

he considers himself to have a stake in the outcome. Third, the Ólafssons are assured that the terms will not be extreme (outlawry, for example, is ruled out). Fourth, in the negotiation itself balance is emphasized, each side sending fifteen men with their chosen arbitrators and neither trying to intimidate with superior force. Finally, the Ólafssons seal the bargain by giving gifts to the Bollasons in addition to the compensation they have paid:

Halldórr gaf Bolla sverð gott, en Steinþórr Ólafsson gaf Þorleiki skjöld; var þat ok góðr gripr; ok var síðan slitit þinginu, ok þóttu hvártveggju hafa vaxit af þessum málum.

Halldór Ólafsson gave Bolli a fine sword, and Steinþór Ólafsson gave Þorleik a shield, which was also an excellent gift. Thereafter the Assembly was brought to a close, and both sides were thought to have enhanced their prestige over this affair.³³

Generosity is required from both those who give and those who receive these gifts, and so both sides gain honour. Each has *vaxit* 'increased'. Such outcomes were not easy to achieve, since Icelanders typically saw themselves as competing for honour. According to William Ian Miller:

The amount of honor in the Icelandic universe was perceived to be constant at best, and over the long run, it seemed to be diminishing. The men of the present generation were never quite the men of their great-grandfather's time. Honor was thus, as a matter of social mathematics, acquired at someone else's expense. When yours went up, someone else's went down.³⁴

Much of the time the pursuit of honour does indeed look like a zero-sum game. But Miller also observes that it 'was possible . . . to circumscribe interactions in such a way that adversaries could both gain honor' (p. 31). Snorri and other skilful negotiators understand this very well. It is indeed essential to any settlement that neither party should feel that they have

³³ Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, *Laxdæla Saga*, p. 211; Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson, *Laxdæla Saga*, p. 224.

³⁴ *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, p. 30.

lost honour, or at least that they have lost no more than their foes;³⁵ otherwise the temptation to reopen hostilities with a view to evening the score is overwhelming. Egil Skallagrimsson, the great warrior poet, is temperamentally unable to grasp this truth: when asked to decide the terms of a settlement between his son Þorstein and his neighbour Steinar, the judgement he pronounces is outrageously one-sided, and Steinar's father Qnund says, *ek hefí allan mik við lagt at skirra vandræðum þeira, en þaðan af skal ek ekki af spara, þat er ek má gera til óþurftar Þorsteini* 'I have made every effort to prevent the trouble between them, but from now on I will not restrain myself from any inconvenience I can cause to Þorstein'.³⁶ If Egil ever had the intention to promote peace (one may doubt), he has failed, for the situation is now worse than before: Steinar soon tries to kill Þorstein, who then drives him from the district. Only force and intimidation can bring an end to this dispute.

After they have settled with the Óláfssons, Bolli and Þorleik Bollason go abroad. Bolli stays away for a number of years, and Þorleik, it seems, never does go home. If Bolli ever encounters the Óláfssons again the fact is not recorded. In this respect the successful settlement between the Bollasons and the Óláfssons differs from the failed settlements between Aldred and Carl and between Sichari and Chramnesind, both of which feature strained friendships between former antagonists. It differs, too, from the settlement between the Danes and the Heathobards, which involves the marriage of Freawaru to a foe and the irritating presence of an armed Danish contingent in her husband's court (discussed above, pp. 63 and 155–66). If one had to assign a single reason for these three failures, it might well be that too much has been asked of peacemaking: attempts have been made to build amicable relationships when it would have worked better for the disputants to keep their distance. When former antagonists spend long

³⁵ A memorable statement of the principle comes in an account of the resolution of a dispute between two tribesmen in nineteenth-century Montenegro, one of whom has killed the other's son for seducing and impregnating his daughter, then refusing to marry her. The oldest of the judges charged with settling the dispute says, near the end of the deliberations, 'It would be an evil thing if one party to a legal case were to go home singing and the other lamenting' (Boehm, *Blood Revenge*, p. 127).

³⁶ Nordal, *Egil's Saga*, p. 288; Scudder and Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir, *Egil's Saga*, p. 196.

periods together, the likelihood increases that one of them will remember his grievances at a moment when he has the opportunity to take action. As one of the Durham Proverbs says, *Ðā ne sacað þe ætsamne ne bēoð* 'They do not quarrel who are not together'.³⁷

Anthropologists have noted the great difficulty of turning disputants into friends. Elizabeth Colson offers a quick summary of her own fieldwork in this area and that of others:

Gulliver recognized that hostilities survived ritual affirmations of agreement or submission ending the particular case. Moore writes of disputes ending but anger persisting . . . , while I have found the same thing to be true among Gwembe Tonga. Gluckman on his return to Barotseland in 1965 was able to follow up subsequent developments among contenders in a number of cases he had recorded in the 1940s. He found that despite the court's efforts at the restoration of good relationships, some litigants had remained as hostile as ever, and disputes continued to erupt among them The 'everyday battering of reality' subverts the desire of the court to restore harmony, just as it subverts the harmony sought through rituals. The very embeddedness of law in social life ensures this.³⁸

In truth, this looks a good bit like common sense: the rituals of settlement may restore peace, but it is too much to expect them to convert hostility to friendship. If Snorri had tried to arrange a series of social evenings between the Bollasons and the Ólafssons, his efforts to make peace might have been less successful.

Beowulf tells of one successful settlement, that between Beowulf's father Ecgtheow and the Wylfings (459–72). Few details are mentioned: only that Ecgtheow had killed one Heatholaf and that the settlement was arranged by Hrothgar, who paid the compensation. Tales of the return of violence are so pervasive in *Beowulf* that a story in which violence *does not* return ought to be presented as extraordinary. And yet neither Hrothgar nor the poet seems to think it so. The telling is accompanied by no exclamations about how rare good settlements are; rather, it looks like a routine piece of business, told merely by way of explaining that there is already a

³⁷ Arngart, 'The Durham Proverbs', p. 292.

³⁸ 'The Contentiousness of Disputes', pp. 69–70.

relationship between Hrothgar and Beowulf. Settlements that fail make for compelling stories: in going wrong they expose the machinery of dispute resolution far more interestingly than those that are negotiated in the ordinary way and with the usual outcome. This one is dispatched in a few lines; the case of Finn and Hengest, on the other hand, is interesting enough to receive extended treatment.

The agreement

As discussions of the agreement between Finn and Hengest are sometimes based partly on inferences about things not stated explicitly in this allusively told tale, a good way to begin the rest of our discussion might be to review exactly what the text says.

After telling of Hildeburh's sorrow, the poet turns to Finn's situation: war has taken all but a few of his thegns so that he can neither finish off Hengest nor drive him out. Then the agreement itself is described in detail:

Ac hig him geþingo budon:
 þæt hīe him oðer flet eal gerȳmdon
 healle ond hēahsetl, þæt hīe healfre geweald
 wið Ēotena bearn āgan mōston,
 ond æt feohgyftum Folcwaldan sunu
 dōgra gehwylce Dene weorþode,
 Hengestes hēap hringum wenede
 efne swa swiðe sincgestrēonum
 fættan goldes, swā hē Frēsena cyn
 on bēorsele byldan wolde.
 Ðā hīe getruwedon on twā healfa
 fæste frioðuwære. Fin Hengeste
 elne ƿunflitmeƿ āðum benemde
 þæt hē þā wēalāfe weotena dōme
 ārum hēolde, þæt ðær ænig mon
 wordum ne worcum wære ne brāce,
 ne þurh inwitsearo æfre gemænden
 ðēah hīe hira bēaggyfan banan folgedon

ðeodenlēase, þā him swā geþearfod wæs.
 Gyf þonne Frȳsna hwylc frēcnan sprāce
 ðæs morþorhetes myndgiend wære,
 þonne hit sweordes ecg sēðan scolde.
 āð wæs geæfned ond ꝥicgeꝥ gold
 āhæfen of horde. (1085–1108)

But they offered them terms:
 that they would prepare another whole dwelling for them,
 a hall and high seat; that they could have
 control of half of it with the sons of the Jutes;
 and at the giving of gifts every day
 the son of Folcwalda would honour the Danes,
 would present Hengest's company with rings
 and treasures of plated gold just as much
 as he would encourage the Frisians.
 Then they concluded a firm peace-agreement
 on the two sides. Finn courageously ꝥand without demurꝥ
 declared to Hengest with oaths that he would,
 by the judgement of his counsellors, hold
 the survivors in honour, so that no man there
 would break the agreement with words or works
 nor through malicious devices ever complain,
 though, lordless, they [the Danes] followed
 their ring-giver's killer, since they did so by necessity.
 Then if any of the Frisians with insolent speech
 should recollect the murderous enmity,
 the sword's edge would have to settle it.
 The terms of the oath were fulfilled and ꝥicgeꝥ gold
 raised from the hoard.

There are textual problems in this passage, but only a couple that make much difference to the interpretation I will offer here. First, there has been disagreement whether lines 1099b–1103 refer to the Frisians or the Danes. Since the Danes are the only ones in the position of following their lord's killer, Klaeber prefers to read the lines as referring to them. In that case, he writes, *þæt* in line 1099 must be translated 'provided that'. But

no one has ever produced any evidence that *þæt* can have this meaning.³⁹ As Bruce Mitchell has (reluctantly) suggested,⁴⁰ it is possible to read lines 1099b–1103 as a clause of purpose: *þæt* in line 1099 is here translated ‘so that’.

The second problem is stickier. At line 1107 the manuscript reads *āð* ‘oath’, but most modern editors emend to *ād* ‘pyre’ and translate *ād wæs geæfned* as ‘the pyre was prepared’.⁴¹ Support for the emendation comes from line 3106, where *(ge)æfnan* means ‘prepare’ and is used of Beowulf’s funeral pyre. On the other hand, this verb is never used, either in *Beowulf* or elsewhere in Old English, with *ād* as its object.

The verb *(ge)æfnan* (the Anglian spelling *-efnan* also occurs) is an exclusively poetic word. Its usual meaning is ‘perform, carry out’, and in *Beowulf* the object is often a military feat, as in line 2622, *eorlscipe efnan* ‘perform warlike deeds’. In other poems it is used with *bebod* ‘command’ in the sense ‘obey, do as commanded’; it can be a synonym for *(ge)læstan* ‘perform, carry out’, with which it is found in variation: *ond his bebodu læstan*, *æfnan on ēðle* ‘and carry out his commands, obey them in the land’ (*Guthlac B* 833); *ac ic þīne bebodu efnde and læste* ‘but I obeyed and carried out your commands’ (*Paris Psalter* 118:143). The verb *(ge)læstan* can be used of oaths, as, for example, in the Old English *Orosius*:

Gē murcniāð nū, for þām þe monega folc þe gē anwald ofer hæfdon noldon
ēow gelæstan þæt hie ēow behēton; ond nellað geþencan hū lāð ēow selfum
wæs tō gelæstanne ēowre āþas þām þe ofer ēow anwald hæfdon.⁴²

³⁹ Klaeber’s final plea for this reading offers no evidence at all: ‘We can hardly avoid assigning conditional value to this clause, for how could Finn solemnly declare that nobody would break the treaty?’ (‘Some Notes on OE. Poems’, p. 218).

⁴⁰ *Old English Syntax*, §3660.

⁴¹ This emendation has nearly as long a pedigree as anything in *Beowulf* scholarship, having been proposed by Grundtvig in a note to his translation (*Bjowulfs dræpe*, p. 283). Klaeber argued for it forcefully in his edition; it is retained by Fulk, Bjork and Niles and adopted by Mitchell and Robinson. It is rejected by Bolton in his revision of Wrenn’s edition (*Beowulf with the Finnesburg Fragment*). Whitelock *The Audience of Beowulf*, p. 18 suggested retaining *āð* but offered no arguments.

⁴² Bately, *The Old English Orosius*, 67.7–10.

You are complaining now because many peoples over whom you had power did not wish to carry out what they had promised you; and you do not wish to think about how hateful it was to you to carry out your oaths to those who had power over you.

(*Ge*)*æfnan* is not a common verb; we should not make too much of the fact that it does not occur with *āð*. It should be enough that one of its attested meanings fits perfectly with *āð* as its object. The meaning of *āð gelēstan* is ‘fulfil the terms of an oath’, that is, do what one has sworn to do, and *āð geæfnan* should mean the same.⁴³

As pointed out by Fulk, Niles and Bjork, the grammatical fit of *āð wæs geæfned* for its place in *Beowulf* 1099 is not perfect, since *āð* is singular while in line 1097 Finn swears plural oaths to Hengest; but this is a weak case for emendation. And an oath is a good *cultural* fit. Oaths are pervasive in early medieval histories and chronicles;⁴⁴ explaining their importance, Richard Abels writes, ‘A supernatural sanction was needed to secure a man’s promises in a period when the coercive power of government was so weak’. Fredric L. Cheyette sees oaths as fundamental to any understanding of disputes, and Timothy Reuter writes that peacemaking would typically be concluded with oath-taking.⁴⁵ So it is in the Finn episode: Finn swears to fulfil the terms of the agreement, and he does fulfil them when gold is brought from the hoard to be given as gifts to the Frisians and the Danes.

Now for the promised summary of the agreement, presented here as a list of points:

- The terms of the agreement are offered by the Frisians to the Danes: this is Finn’s proposal (1085b).
- The proposed arrangements in the hall (1086–8) are a little obscure: clearly the Danes are to share a hall with the *Ēotan*, and our un-

⁴³ As pointed out in J. R. R. Tolkien, *Finn and Hengest*, p. 109: ‘*āð geæfnan* must mean “carry out the oath”; *āð* means the terms, not the ceremony’. In the end, Tolkien adopts the emendation of *āð* to *ad*.

⁴⁴ See, for example, the well-indexed translations Nelson, *Annals of St-Bertin*, p. 261, and Reuter, *Annals of Fulda*, p. 168.

⁴⁵ Abels, *Lordship and Military Obligation*, p. 85; Cheyette, ‘Some Reflections’, pp. 259, 260–3; Reuter, ‘Peace-breaking, Feud, Rebellion, Resistance’, pp. 362, 366.

derstanding of this part of the agreement must depend on how we understand the role of the *Ēotan* in the drama. It is in any case clear from the next point that the Danes and Finn's followers can expect to spend a good bit of time together.

- Finn must every day give gifts to the Danes exactly as he does to the Frisians (1089–94): presumably this means that he must treat the Danes as if they had been serving him militarily, as his own men have been doing.
- Both sides agree to these proposals (1095–6a).
- Finn swears an oath to hold the Danes in honour (1096b–1099a): this seems to be a summation of the other parts of the agreement, now solemnized with an oath. In the traditional reading of this passage, Finn's oath is contingent upon the Danes not complaining about their situation; in the reading adopted here he enters into the agreement so as to keep the Danes from complaining (1099b–1103). Finn also swears to impose dire penalties on any of his Frisians who try to stir up trouble by speaking of the battle that the Danes and Frisians have fought (1104–6).
- Finn puts the terms of the agreement into effect by taking gold from his treasury to distribute as gifts (1107–8a).

There is no mention here of Hengest swearing an oath to Finn as Finn swears an oath to Hengest. If my reading of *þæt* (1099) is accepted, there is no mention of any duty at all owed by Hengest to Finn.⁴⁶ Even when *þæt* is translated (despite the lack of evidence) as 'provided that', Finn's expectations of the Danes look more like pious hopes than enforceable demands. By contrast, he backs up his expectation of good behaviour from his own men with a threat of severe punishment. There is no mention of compensation for the killings that have occurred so far. Rather, the payments that Finn has promised to make to Hengest's company are represented as gifts like those he gives his own men.

⁴⁶ The same has been pointed out by Wolf, 'Enacting the Ties that Bind', p. 21: 'Not once in this entire description of the treaty . . . does the poet ascribe any obligations to Hengest and the Danes'.

From one point of view, the agreement seems to effect a merger of the Frisian and Danish forces under Finn's lordship.⁴⁷ One could interpret Finn's gifts to the Danes to mean that Finn's relationship to them is the same as his relationship to his own men. The symbolism of the funeral pyre, on which are burned *ealle . . . þāra ðe þær gūð fornam bēga folces* 'all those of both nations whom war had taken there' (1122–4) would seem also to suggest such a merger.

But attentive readers of this book have probably anticipated the need to look more closely at the transfer of wealth from Finn to Hengest's Danes. Finn's gifts to his own thegns do not seem problematic: they are straightforwardly the kind of gift described in Chapter Two, returns for gifts of military service and inducements to perform more brave deeds. But what is Finn paying for with his gifts to the Danes? These are not return gifts, for the Danes have performed no services for him—quite the opposite! The only other way to interpret them is as payments for peace, very like tribute, though it would be incendiary, in the volatile atmosphere of Finn's hall, to use words like *gafol* and *gombe*. Payments of tribute are, as mentioned above (p. 177), anti-gifts: given under threat, they are unlike the mutually beneficial gifts described in Chapter Two, increasing the honour of both parties. Rather, they transfer honour one way only, from giver to recipient. Viewed as tribute, the treasure that Finn gives to the Danes can neither bring them under his control nor impose obligation on them; rather, each round of giving weakens Finn and makes the Danes stronger and more independent. This reading of Finn's gifts is consistent with the one-sidedness of the agreement between himself and Hengest, which imposes all obligation on the Frisian side and delivers all benefits to the Danish side. It may also be suggested by the departure of Finn's warriors, who see little to be gained, and possibly much to be lost, by wintering over with him.

The two interpretations of the agreement offered here are radically incompatible, but both are inescapable in the text. The reading by which the Danes are in effect Finn's thegns is stated clearly in lines 1102–3, 'though, lordless, they followed their ring-giver's killer, since they did so by neces-

⁴⁷ See Hill, *Anglo-Saxon Warrior Ethic*, pp. 61–2: 'Thus Finn will become the evenhanded lord for a dangerously mixed group of aggrieved Half-Danes and aggressively edgy, if weakened, Frisians.'

sity'. The Danes are constrained to follow Finn, presumably because their force has been weakened, temporarily at least, by the battle in which Hnæf fell.⁴⁸ But the one-sidedness of the agreement and the wealth that is *āhæfen of horde* 'raised from the hoard' also speak clearly, and the story they tell is of Finn's weakness relative to the Danes: he is the one forced to make the concessions and pay out the treasure.

Presumably Finn would prefer to see his payments as gifts and his relationship to the Danes as that of a lord to his thegns. Hengest would prefer to see them as tribute and Finn as a subject king required to pay for peace. But each is inevitably aware of the other point of view: Finn must know that people will say he is paying tribute and Hengest that people will say he is following his lord's killer. As early Germanic heroes seem unable to tolerate slights of any kind,⁴⁹ this situation is an explosive one which looks as if it were designed as much to increase as to decrease tension. The gifts that are intended to keep the peace must remind both giver and recipient that they represent honour lost as well as gained; the ledger in which each side keeps track of its valuation in the Economy of Honour is in danger of getting seriously out of balance. Frisians and Danes alike, watching Finn distribute treasure to their enemies, must ask themselves what kinds of deeds (killing their friends?) he is rewarding. Further, these enemies are forced by circumstances to spend a *wælfāgne winter* 'slaughter-stained winter' together, so that any reminder of the grievances that must be at the front of their minds has an excellent chance of being translated quickly into violent action. By winter's end, Hengest is already contemplating revenge (1138–41); it was never going to take much to set him in motion.

⁴⁸ Or, depending on whether one emends l. 1130, by the onset of winter, which makes it impossible for Hengest and his men to go home. But I have promised not to discuss this line.

⁴⁹ As evident in Miller's definition of honour (*Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, pp. 29–34) and Stewart's discussion of reflexive honour (Stewart, *Honor*, pp. 64–71), which is characterized by 'extraordinary sensitivity . . . to any kind of affront' (p. 70). See also the remarks of Graeber (quoted above, p. 13), on the 'notorious jumpiness' of the man of honour.

The incitement of Hengest

In the end, what happens is precisely what the agreement between Finn and Hengest was intended to forestall. Someone (perhaps a son of Hunlaf) lays a sword (perhaps named Hunlafing) in Hengest's lap, and two other Danes, Guthlaf and Oslaf, speak up with complaints and recriminations (1143–5, 1148–50). Such speech and expressive gesture had to be prevented at all costs. One's honour is determined entirely by what people are saying: if they will only stay silent, then one can pretend to forget all kinds of unpleasantness. But an insult spoken aloud or a grievance aired cannot be ignored; it must be acted upon.⁵⁰

A point made by Miller in his study of Icelandic saga, strikingly true in both the Finn and Freawaru episodes, is that inciters are usually dependents.⁵¹ In the Finn episode they seem to be Hnæf's thegns, now under Hengest's command, who would not presume to take action themselves. In the Freawaru episode the inciter is an old man, seemingly too infirm to act on his own; he is also a repository of memory, *se ðe eall geman, gārcwealm gumena* 'who remembers everything, the spear-deaths of men' (2042–3). His role is more to remind than to argue for action. In Finn's hall, it is reminding (*myndgiend* 1105) that is most specifically prohibited. Icelandic incitement, too, can feature the invocation of memory. In *Laxdæla Saga* (cited above, pp. 183–6), Þorgerð ends her harangue saying, *var þetta ørendit mest, at minna yðr á þetta, ef þér myðid eigi áðr* 'my main reason for coming here was to remind you of this, in case you had forgotten'.⁵² Her sons have not forgotten, of course, but memory need not

⁵⁰ An excellent and compact example is *Þorsteins Þáttr Stangarhöggs*, translated and discussed by W. I. Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, pp. 51–76. The principals in the story, Þorstein and Bjarni, are reluctant to act; but they are set in motion by a few words from members of their households. My colleague A. C. Spearing has pointed out to me an analogue in Malory's 'Most Piteous Tale of the Morte Arthur saunz Guerdon': everyone knows that 'sir Launcelot lyeth dayly and nyghtly by the quene' (Vinaver, *Malory: Works*, p. 673), but it is not until Agravain and Mordred venture to utter the fact aloud that the society of the Round Table begins to come apart.

⁵¹ *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, pp. 211–4.

⁵² Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, *Laxdæla Saga*, p. 162; Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson, *Laxdæla Saga*, p. 183.

provoke action until it is given voice.

The Icelandic inciter often shows or presents an item that belonged to the dead person, or even some part of the corpse. The most famous example is Hildigunn's throwing Hǫskuld's cloak, in which she has wrapped up clots of his dried blood, over Flosi's shoulders in chapter 116 of *Njáls Saga*;⁵³ but there are many. In the Beowulfian scenes the item is a sword:⁵⁴ in the Freawaru episode it belonged to the slain father of the youth who is encouraged to take revenge (see above, pp. 63), while in the Finn episode it is hard to identify. But the sword of the episode is well known, perhaps too much so to need further identification for the audience of *Beowulf*. It is *billa selest* 'the best of swords' (1144), and its edges are known to the *Ēotan* (1145). The narrative formula would be well served if the sword belonged to Hnæf, but the case is impossible to prove. These objects represent the absent victims whose honour must be recovered: always the objects are, like swords, connected with the practice of violence or, like Hǫskuld's cloak, with violent death. They assert that honour can be recovered only by bloodshed, not by peaceful settlement.

The Danes who incite Hengest to take action are conventional elements of the dispute, just as much as the mutual friends of Aldred and Carl or the bishop and king in the story of Sichari and Chramnesind. In sagas the inciter is portrayed in a negative light more often than the negotiator is; but it is worth remembering that, as the story of Gundobad and Clovis shows, the negotiator can also come in for criticism. Here there is nothing negative in the portrayal of Guthlaf, Oslaf and the Dane who lays the sword in Hengest's lap; likewise, in the closest analogue to the Freawaru episode, from Saxo's *Gesta Danorum*, the inciter Starkath is represented as performing an important service for his king, who needs some forcible reminding of his duty to rise from his state of torpid luxury and redden the hall with his enemies' blood. As Miller has pointed out concerning the Icelandic material, the inciter was not always presented as making unreasonable demands;⁵⁵ likewise in both the Finn and Freawaru episodes the

⁵³ For a compelling analysis of this scene, see Clover, 'Hildigunnr's Lament'.

⁵⁴ See Van Meter, 'Ritualized Presentation of Weapons'.

⁵⁵ *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, p. 213.

inciters are quite right that lost honour has not yet been regained. While it is probable that people in the early Middle Ages settled their disputes more often by peaceful than by violent means, and it was quite possible to recover lost honour through peaceful dispute resolution, revenge-taking was always an option. It had its constituency in both life and literature, and it was far more likely to be memorialized in works like *Beowulf*, the sagas, and Gregory's *Historia* than the peaceful alternative.

Appendix: *onmunan* in 'Cynewulf and Cyneheard'

The difficulty in understanding the verb *onmunan* in the *ASC* entry for 755 (*recte* 757), quoted above, p. 181, goes back to the eleventh century. This word is found occasionally in texts of the tenth century and earlier (never later than ca. 1000) in the sense 'consider someone worthy of something' or 'attribute some quality to someone', with the 'someone' in the accusative and the 'something' or 'some quality' in the genitive.⁵⁶ A good example comes from King Alfred's translation of Gregory's *Regula Pastoralis*, preserved in a ninth-century manuscript:

Ælc ðara ðe sie under ðæm gioke hlafordscipes, he sceal his hlaford æghwelcre are
ond weorðscipes wierðne onmunan.

Each person who is under the yoke of lordship must consider his lord to be worthy
of every honour and worship.⁵⁷

We also find the word used in the expected way in Vercelli XIV (l. 164), Blickling XV (p. 181, last line), *Andreas* 892 and *Beowulf* 2640. The last of these reads *onmunde ūsic mērða* 'he considered us worthy of honour', where *ūsic* is accusative and *mērða* is genitive.

In late manuscripts of earlier texts we sometimes see confusion in the copying of phrases containing *onmunan*, as if the scribes were unfamiliar with the idiom

⁵⁶ It occurs in *Instructions for Christians* 154 (ed. Rosier, p. 15), apparently without the genitive, and this construction seems possible; but there may also be corruption in this line, as *mænige* (for *mæne* according to Rosier) in the same line is an anomalous form. *Onmunan* occurs once in a gloss, but one would not expect much syntactical context here.

⁵⁷ Sweet, *King Alfred's West-Saxon Version*, 201.22–3. Gregory's Latin reads, *Quicumque sunt sub iugo serui, dominos suos omni honore dignos arbitrentur* (iii.5, *PL* lxxvii. 56, quoting 1 Timothy 6:1).

and so likely to make mistakes. Of the *Chronicle* manuscripts, only A, B and the badly damaged G have the construction with accusative and genitive; the latest of these was written in the very early eleventh century. The later manuscripts (written in the mid-eleventh to early twelfth centuries) all mangle it in some way:

C: Ða cwædon hi þæt hie þæs ne amundon ‘þe ma þe eowre geferan þe mid þam cinge ofslegene wæron’.

D: Ða cwædon heo þæt hi hit þæs ne onmunden þon ma þe heora geferan þe mid þam cyninge wæron ofslægene.

E: Ða cwædon hi þæt þæt hi þæs ne gemundon þonne ma þe heora geferen þe mid þam cininge wæron ofslagene.

The variety of constructions seems to suggest confusion rather than substitution of a more modern idiom: the C, D and E scribes can simply make no sense of the texts they are copying. We get the same impression from John of Worcester, whose translation of the phrase seems to involve guesswork:

Quod nobis offertis sociis cum rege occisis prius optulimus uestris. Verum sicut illi nostre petitioni noluerunt acquiescere, ita et nos hac in re uestre nolumus obtemperare.

What you offer us we formerly offered your comrades slain with the king, and just as they refused to accede to our request so we also will not submit to you in this matter.⁵⁸

Both William of Malmesbury and Henry of Huntingdon⁵⁹ condense the story in such a way that they do not have to translate the difficult phrase; and it seems fair to say that Gaimar, who attempts to retell this story in Anglo-Norman verse, fails to understand it on many levels.⁶⁰

So also with early editors and translators of the *Chronicle*. Abraham Wheelock's Latin translates the G-text (now severely damaged), which followed A faithfully:

⁵⁸ Darlington and McGurk, *Chronicle of John of Worcester*, pp. 216–7.

⁵⁹ Mynors, Thomson, and M. Winterbottom, *William of Malmesbury: Gesta regum Anglorum*, i.56–7; Greenway, *Henry of Huntingdon: Historia Anglorum*, pp. 252–5.

⁶⁰ S. T. D. Hardy and Martin, *Gaimar: Lestorie des Engles*, ll. 1811–1906: i. 73–7; trans. ii. 59–62.

tum dixerunt, quod ipsi illos (*cognatos suos*) non magis curare, quam socios vestros, qui cum Rege interempti erant.⁶¹

Then they said that they themselves cared no more for them [their kinsmen] than your comrades who were killed with the king.

Edmund Gibson introduces an emendation from E, corrupting the good G-text he was following; thus confusion in the later manuscripts increases the confusion in the early editions. Like Wheelock, Gibson guesses at the meaning of *onmunan*:

dicebantque quod ipsi ad hoc non magis parati erant, quam eorum socii qui cum Rege fuerunt interfecti.⁶²

and they said that they themselves were no more prepared to do that than their companions who had been killed with the king.

Anna Gurney's English translation follows Gibson's Latin closely: 'and that they were no more inclined to do this thing than their own fellow soldiers who with the king had been slain'.⁶³ James Ingram translates, "And we are as regardless of the result," they rejoined, "as our comrades who with the king were slain".⁶⁴ But it was Richard Price, editing and translating the *Chronicle* for Henry Petrie's *Monumenta Historica Britannica*, who hit upon the understanding of the passage that has been most popular; his translation reads, 'then they said, that they no more minded it "than your companions who were slain with the king"' (p. 332). Price's translation has the great virtue of making sense; his rendering of *onmunan* has the additional virtue of looking at least vaguely like what the verb might mean given its etymology (the simplex *munan* means 'remember, be mindful of, think of'). Yet his translation is still a guess and an odd rendering of this construction with accusative and genitive.⁶⁵ Benjamin Thorpe, in his popular and accessible translation of the *Chronicle* for the Rolls Series, follows Price in his rendering of

⁶¹ *Historiæ ecclesiasticæ gentis Anglorum libri v*, p. 523.

⁶² *Chronicon Saxonicum*, p. 58.

⁶³ *A Literal Translation of the Saxon Chronicle*, p. 64.

⁶⁴ *The Saxon Chronicle*, p. 71.

⁶⁵ Old English does have verbs that take reflexives which are better not translated into Modern English (a common one is *ondrædan* 'be afraid'). Some editors have suggested treating *onmunden* that way in the *Chronicle* passage (e.g. Marsden, *The Cambridge Old English Reader*, p. 249), but doing so is probably not the best course when it is possible to translate a construction without ignoring one of its elements.

onmunan;⁶⁶ like other early editors, he also misunderstood the verb in *Beowulf* 2640, where he translated *onmunde usic mæ̃rða* as ‘he reminded us of glories’.⁶⁷ John Earle’s *Chronicle* edition follows Price and Thorpe in translating *onmunden* as ‘they minded, cared about’.⁶⁸ The glossary in Plummer’s influential revision of Earle’s edition renders *onmunan* as ‘to esteem, regard’,⁶⁹ coming closer to the meaning; but Plummer does not explain the whole construction, and perhaps for that reason his glossary entry has had less influence than Price’s translation. T. Northcote Toller’s continuation of Joseph Bosworth’s dictionary translates the *Chronicle* passage ‘then they said, that they did not consider themselves entitled to accept the offer, “any more than your comrades did”’ (BT, s.v. *onmunan*). As I pointed out some years ago,⁷⁰ Toller did well to reject the guesswork of previous scholars; it is too bad, however, that more editors and translators have not followed his example.

⁶⁶ *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, ii.43.

⁶⁷ Thorpe, *The Anglo-Saxon Poems of Beowulf*, p. 178. Compare Kemble’s translation, ‘he reminded us of our fame’ (p. 107). Grein’s *Sprachschatz* rendered *onmunan* correctly for the poetic passages which were then known (s.v. *onmunan*), and since that time most editions and translations of *Beowulf* have rendered line 2640 correctly.

⁶⁸ *Two of the Saxon Chronicles*, p. 431.

⁶⁹ Plummer, *Two of the Saxon Chronicles*, i.382.

⁷⁰ ‘Toller at School’, pp. 113–14.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Beowulf's Last Triumph

DEFEAT, ACCORDING to J. R. R. Tolkien, is the theme of the last third of *Beowulf*. In a passage of his '*Beowulf*: The Monsters and the Critics' that probably many readers of this chapter have got by heart, the great critic elaborates his idea of the poem as 'a contrasted description of two moments in a great life, rising and setting' (p. 271):

In the struggle with Grendel one can as a reader dismiss the certainty of literary experience that the hero will not in fact perish, and allow oneself to share the hopes and fears of the Geats upon the shore. In the second part the author has no desire whatever that the issue should remain open, even according to literary convention. There is no need to hasten like the messenger, who rode to bear the lamentable news to the waiting people (2892 ff.). They may have hoped, but we are not supposed to. By now we are supposed to have grasped the plan. Disaster is foreboded. Defeat is the theme. Triumph over the foes of man's precarious fortress is over, and we approach slowly and reluctantly the inevitable victory of death. (p. 274)

The point is well enough known to need little emphasis: for Tolkien, defeat is both what happens to Beowulf and the great theme of human existence: 'A light starts—*lihte se leoma ofer landa fela*¹—and there is a sound of music; but the outer darkness and its hostile offspring lie ever in wait for the torches to fail and the voices to cease' (p. 277). Glory is transitory and tragedy inevitable.

Battle is not a zero-sum game in which one person's loss is always another's gain: it happens quite often that everyone loses. Looked at from

¹ Tolkien quotes *Beowulf* l. 311: 'the light shone over many lands'.

one point of view, that may also be the case here: both Beowulf and the dragon are dead, after all. But the word 'defeat', applied to one party in a conflict, implies that some other party has won a victory, and it is far from clear who Tolkien would consider the winner to be. He writes of 'the inevitable victory of death', but though *dēað* in *Beowulf* governs active verbs (e.g. *nimeð* 'takes', *oferswyðeð* 'overpowers'—441, 1768), it is never so vividly personified as to encourage us to view it as an antagonist. Tolkien's phrase seems little more than a rhetorical amplification of the commonplace that everyone must die. And it hardly needs to be pointed out that the dragon is not a winner, since Beowulf and Wiglaf have killed it. In death, indeed, it is much less than a dead man: it has become merely a waste-disposal problem, which the Geats solve by pushing its corpse over the edge of a cliff and into the sea (3131–3).² By the poem's end the offspring of darkness, if the Grendelkin and the dragon are their representatives on earth, don't seem to be very far ahead of the game.

Still, the intuition that Beowulf comes to a bad end is a powerful one, and it has given rise to an influential line of critical thought that seeks the cause of the disaster in some failing of the hero, such as greed, a misguided devotion to the heroic ethos or a lapse of judgement in taking on too powerful an enemy.³ I would argue that the point of view from which death invariably looks like defeat is a modern one,⁴ not shared by people

² John Leyerle seems to look at this gesture as one of respect: 'The Geats push the body of the dragon into the sea as they would launch a longship' ('Beowulf the Hero and King', p. 91). But pushing a ship off a cliff would be a destructive way to launch it.

³ For a summary of the critical positions, see Fulk and Cain, *A History of Old English Literature*, pp. 210–11.

⁴ See Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying*, p. 6: 'The more we are achieving advances in science, the more we seem to fear and deny the reality of death.' For a different explanation of the modern aversion to death, see Žižek, *Violence*, p. 29: 'We from the First World countries find it more and more difficult even to imagine a public or universal cause for which one would be ready to sacrifice one's life. Indeed, the split between First and Third World runs increasingly along the lines of an opposition between leading a long, satisfying life full of material and cultural wealth, and dedicating one's life to some transcendent cause.' One could argue that this cultural difference between the First and Third Worlds resembles that between the medieval and the modern West.

in all times and places. Of course medieval men and women preferred being alive to being dead; no one would claim that they did not value life. But what Brigid O'Shaughnessy says to Sam Spade—'I don't think there's anything worse than death'⁵—would seem odd to a medieval reader, who could very easily name several far worse things. Death could even be good and happy: in many stories enthusiastically received by medieval audiences (the gospels and saints' lives chief among them), the moment of physical death coincides with that of the triumph of the soul.

While the conventions governing the treatment of death in heroic and Christian narrative may differ, it is possible in either for the hero to triumph in death. This chapter will examine Beowulf's last battle from the vantage point of the Economy of Honour. In light of the definitions and arguments I have offered so far in this book, the relevant question when assessing the outcome of the battle must be not so much 'who is still alive?' as 'who has the treasure?'

The good death

That the saintly death, as I have said, is a happy one requires no argument: in Bede's *HE* and numerous Old English and Anglo-Latin saints' lives we see the saint rejoice as life's end approaches, and always the emphasis is on the journey of the triumphant soul *a morte in uitam* 'from death to life' (John 5:24).

The saintly death makes a curious sort of contact with the heroic variety in the various accounts that have been preserved of the death of St Eadmund, king of the East Angles, in 869.⁶ The earliest of these, in *ASC* A 870, does not hint at his eventual sanctification:

Hēr rād se here ofer Mierce innan Ēastengle ond wintersetl nāmon æt ƿēodforda. Ond þȳ wintra Ēadmund cyning him wiþ feaht, ond þā Deniscan sige nāmon ond þone cyning ofslōgon ond þæt lond all geēodon.

⁵ Hammett, *The Maltese Falcon*, ch. 4.

⁶ For accounts of the growth of the St Eadmund legend and its historicity, see Whitelock, 'Fact and Fiction'; Derry, 'Martyrdom of St Edmund'; and especially Ridyard, *Royal Saints*, pp. 61–73, 211–33.

Here the [viking] army rode through Mercia into East Anglia and took winter quarters at Thetford. And that winter King Eadmund fought against them, and the Danes had the victory and slew the king and conquered that whole land.

Asser's notice of the battle in his *Life of King Alfred* is apparently based on the *Chronicle*:

Eodem anno Eadmund, Orientalium Anglorum rex, contra ipsum exercitum atrociter pugnavit. Sed, proh dolor! paganis nimium gloriantibus, ipso cum magna suorum parte ibidem occiso, inimici loco funeris dominati sunt, et totam illam regionum suo dominio subdiderunt.

In the same year, Eadmund, king of the East Angles, fought ferociously against that army. But alas, he was killed there with a large number of his men, and the Vikings rejoiced triumphantly; the enemy were masters of the battlefield, and they subjected that entire province to their authority.⁷

If Asser has any independent knowledge of the battle, it is conveyed in the adverb *atrociter* 'ferociously'. Ealdorman Æthelweard, writing in the late tenth century, adds a few details, among them that the battle was brief.⁸ Our sources, then, for what they are worth, point to a brief, hard-fought battle in which Eadmund fell, though we cannot rule out the possibility that he was captured and later killed.⁹ Unfortunately nothing is known of the process by which this implied story of a heroic death became the legend of a martyrdom. Susan J. Ridyard discusses possible political reasons for the growth of Eadmund's legend,¹⁰ but surely more than politics had to be involved: the stories that people told each other after the battle had to be the right kind—tales of a good death.

The *Passio S. Eadmundi* by Abbo of Fleury, later translated by Ælfric,¹¹ offers a wealth of the kind of detail missing from the *Chronicle* and Asser,

⁷ Stevenson, *Asser's Life of King Alfred*, p. 26; Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, p. 78.

⁸ Campbell, *Chronicon Æthelweardi*, p. 36.

⁹ As suggested by Whitelock, 'Fact and Fiction', pp. 217–18.

¹⁰ Ridyard, *Royal Saints*, pp. 211–24.

¹¹ Printed Michael Winterbottom, *Three Lives of English Saints*, pp. 65–87; cited by section number. Ælfric's translation is printed Skeat, *Ælfric's Lives of Saints*, ii. 314–35.

though it is unclear how much of it, if any, we ought to believe. In the *Passio* the villain has acquired an identity: he is a king named Hinguar (Ívar in Scandinavian sources).¹² Further, Asser's ferocious battle has entirely disappeared; instead, Eadmund tells the viking messenger that he will *libenter* 'willingly' (9)¹³ be slain if God wills it and patiently waits for his end in his hall. He throws down his weapons as the viking king approaches and dies an appropriately spectacular martyr's death, proclaiming his faith.

One detail of Abbo's *Passio* that seems likelier than others to be grounded in actual events is the viking messenger's demand that Eadmund hand over a good portion of his royal treasury to Hinguar: *mandat ut cum eo antiquos thesauros et paternas diuitias sub eo regnaturus diuidas* 'he commands that you divide your ancient treasure and ancestral wealth with him and reign under him' (7).¹⁴ The vikings' demand comes as no surprise: we meet with a similar one in *The Battle of Maldon* (29–41), and it is consistent with what we know of the behaviour of vikings generally.

Eadmund's response, on the other hand, is a surprise. Ælfric does not translate this part of it:

Thesauros et diuitias quas nobis hactenus contulit propitia diuinitas sumat consumat tua insatiabilis auditas: quoniam, etsi hoc corpus caducum fragile confringas uelut uas fictilie, uera libertas animi numquam tibi uel ad momentum suberit. (9)

Let your insatiable greed take and squander the treasure and wealth which divine favour has until now conferred upon us, for even if you break this weak and fragile body like an earthen vessel, my soul's true freedom will never for a moment submit to you.

Here Eadmund displays a contempt for worldly goods that is admirable in a Christian hero, but Abbo inverts the response we would expect in

¹² See Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, pp. 238–9 for a discussion of the identity of the viking leader.

¹³ In Ælfric, *blīðelice* 'happily' (l. 88).

¹⁴ Ælfric revises this speech in a minor but interesting way, the messenger demanding *þine dīgelan goldbordas* 'your secret gold-hoards' (l. 52). Did Ælfric assume that a king like Eadmund would have buried or otherwise hidden his treasury as the vikings advanced?

a secular narrative of a confrontation between viking raider and English ruler—something more like Byrhtnoth's defiant answer to the viking messenger in *The Battle of Maldon*:

Ne sceole gē swā sōfte sinc gegangan;
 ūs sceal ord and ecg ær gesēman
 grim gūðplega ær wē gofol syllon. (59–61)

You shall not so easily gain the treasure:
 point and edge, grim battle-play, must
 first reconcile us before we give tribute.

Byrhtnoth is attempting to follow the example of Æthelstan and his brother Eadmund, who are praised in *The Battle of Brunanburh* for defending *bord and bāmas* 'treasury and homes' (above, p. 62). It is difficult to suppress the suspicion that the response of Eadmund to the vikings in the earliest tellings of his story sounded more like that of Byrhtnoth than like that of the Eadmund of Abbo's *Passio*.

Abbo inverts another narrative convention with *uera libertas animi* 'the soul's true freedom'. An attribute of the successful king is 'integrity' (see above, p. 71): being at the top of the social and political hierarchy, he is answerable to no one. When the viking messenger challenges Eadmund's integrity by demanding that he become a dependent of Hinguar, we expect Eadmund either to submit or return a defiant answer. Instead he seems to misunderstand the demand; for *uera libertas animi*, the freedom he is unwilling to give up, is the freedom of will that faith enables, *uera* 'true' even implying that the political and personal *libertas* that the messenger demands he give up is not true freedom at all.

The effect of this part of Abbo's *Passio S. Eadmundi* depends on the audience's familiarity with a narrative formula in which a military commander returns a defiant answer to a demand for treasure and fealty. Abbo presents, as it were, a negative image of this formula, the best Old English example of which is *The Battle of Maldon*.¹⁵ But in the various sources that deal with the English defeat at Maldon, Byrhtnoth's end is not as happy as

¹⁵ Another example, in a more subdued key, is the beginning of Abbo of St-Germain's *De bellis Parisiacæ urbis* (Dass, *Viking Attacks on Paris*, pp. 30–1).

Eadmund's: he does not achieve the status of either secular hero or saint. He is flawed as a military commander,¹⁶ his death is not attended by miracles, and, most disappointing, the principle for which he fights, that the nation's *hord* must be defended, is deliberately abandoned when, in the very same year, England adopts a policy of paying off the vikings.¹⁷

There are secular heroes, too, whose deaths are happier than Byrhtnoth's. The story of a hero's end must inevitably be sombre, and yet it can also be a tale of glory. In *Hákonarmál*, as he is borne towards Valhøll, Hákon the Good understandably wants to know why things have turned out so badly:

'Hví þú svá gunni', kvað Hókon,
'skiptir, Geir-Skögul?
Vörum þó verðir gagns frá goðum.'

Hákon said, 'Why have you decided
the battle this way, Spear-Skögul?
We were, after all, worthy of the gods' favour.'¹⁸

But you *have* won, the valkyrie replies, and her words sound like a rebuke: what more could the man want?

'Vér því völdum', kvað Skögul,
'es þú velli helt,
en þínir fiandr flugu'.

'We arranged it', said Skögul,

¹⁶ For a very brief statement of my own position on the controversy concerning the word *ofermōd* in l. 89 of *Maldon*, see *Introduction to Old English*, p. 232 n. 28. Especially important articles on the characterization of Byrhtnoth include Robinson, 'God, Death and Loyalty' and Gneuss, 'The Battle of Maldon 89'. The various primary sources printed by Lapidge, 'The Life of St Oswald' and A. Kennedy, 'Byrhtnoth's Obits' indicate that Byrhtnoth continued to be admired after his death, but did not acquire a saintly reputation.

¹⁷ All *ASC* manuscripts contain notices of the battle in 991, and several mention that the policy of paying the vikings was first proposed by Archbishop Sigeric: see Bately, 'The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle'.

¹⁸ Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, *Heimskringla*, ch. 32. Translations of the prose of *Heimskringla* are from Hollander, *Heimskringla*; translations of the poem are mine.

'that you held the field,
and your enemies fled'.

In his prose account of Hákon's last battle Snorri Sturluson takes care to convey that this is true. The king has won a notable victory, and his death is beside the point. He has put his foes to flight: *Fjöldi manns fell af Eiríkssonum bæði á vígvellinum ok á leið til skipanna ok svá í fforunni, ok fjöldi hljóp á kaf* 'A great number of the Eiríkssons' force fell, both on the battlefield and on their way to the ships and also on the beach, and many leapt into the sea'. As for the wound he has received, it seems more an accident than the result of enemy action: some say a lowly *skósvéinn* 'shoe-servant' named Kisping fired the fatal arrow, but others say (with greater probability, in Snorri's view), that no one can tell who was responsible, *því at orvar ok spjót ok alls konar skotvápn flugu svá þykkt sem drífa* 'because arrows and javelins and all kinds of missiles flew as thick as a fall of snow'.

In depicting the last battle of Count Roland, the anonymous author of *La Chanson de Roland*¹⁹ is as solicitous of his reputation as Snorri is of Hákon's. Two armies lie slain around him, but Roland is alive, though soon to die of exhaustion; when a Saracen, thinking he is *vencut* 'vanquished' (2281), tries to take his sword Durendal as loot, Roland kills him by striking him on the helmet with his olifant. As death approaches he tries but fails to break Durendal, then lies down with the sword and horn under him and turns his head towards Spain:

Pur ço l'at fait que il voelt veirement
Que Carles diet e trestute sa gent,
Li gentilz quens, qu'il fut mort cunquerant. (2361-3)

He did this, in truth, because he wished
that Charles and all his nation should say
that this noble count died while conquering.

Roland's continued possession of his treasures signals that he has lost no honour; facing toward Spain, he conveys to those who find his body that

¹⁹ Cited from Whitehead, *La Chanson de Roland*.

he died advancing against the enemy. However great the disaster for Charlemagne and his army, Roland himself has suffered no defeat. Rather, he ends his life as both hero and saint, angels carrying his soul up to heaven.

It is difficult for modern readers to understand heroes who deliberately walk into situations where death is a near certainty. Roland is one of these and Beowulf may be another; the Icelandic sagas are thickly populated with such characters. But really the phenomenon is not so mysterious. If a man can win honour by dying well, then he has an incentive to manage his last moments—choosing the place, the time and the combatants—even if it means that he must die sooner rather than later. Roland knows very well that his refusal to summon help will mean his own death and that of many others (he has Oliver to make sure it doesn't slip his mind: see 1070–1109), but the certainty of a heroic death is more attractive than an outcome that is uncertain with respect to both life and honour.

Perhaps the most spectacular exemplars of the hero who seems to choose death deliberately are Gunnar and Hogni of *Atlakviða*. When Atli invites them to his hall, promising rich gifts, they are not minded to go. They possess the incomparable Niflung hoard; their brother-in-law's treasures do not impress them. But then Gunnar notices the message that their sister Gúðrún has sent:

Hvat hyggr þú brúði bendo, þá er hon okr baug sendi
varinn váðom heiðingia? Hygg ek, at hon vǫrnuð byði.
Hár fann ek heiðingia ríðit í hring rauðom.
Ylfskr er vegr okkarr, at ríða ørindi.

What do you think the lady meant when she sent us a ring
wrapped in the heath-ranger's coat? I think she offered us a warning.
I found the hair of the heath-ranger twisted round the red ring.
Our way is wolfish if we ride on this journey.²⁰

The invitation has become a challenge, and to refuse it is unthinkable, at least in an Eddic poem. At Atli's hall the brothers are seized (though not before Hogni has killed eight), and Gunnar is given an ultimatum: pay up or die. He chooses death for both his brother and himself. By the poem's

²⁰ Text and translation from U. Dronke, *Heroic Poems*.

end, Gunnar, Högni, Atli and many more will be dead, but if death is defeat, it is more bitter for some than for others. Högni laughs as men cut out his heart, and Gunnar plays his harp in the snake pit; the brothers have not surrendered their gold, and the poet says approvingly, as Gunnar dies, *Svá skal gulli / frækn bringdrifi við fira balda* 'So must a brave, munificent lord guard his gold against men' (32). Atli, on the other hand, fails to seize the Niflung treasure, loses his two sons in the grisliest fashion and dies an ignominious death, drunk, stabbed by his wife.

Other things being equal, Eadmund, Hákon, Roland and the brothers Gunnar and Högni would no doubt prefer life to death. But other things are not equal in these narratives. It is not only that choosing life can have a downside—say, that one may be blamed for leaving a battle early (a concern of Ælfwine at Maldon²¹). It is also that choosing to die well has an upside: that one can join the blessed in heaven or Óðin's *einherjar* in Valhøll, or that one can win honour, the praise of the living, as Beowulf says at a moment when his own survival is in doubt:

Wyrce se þe mōte
dōmes ær dēaþe; þæt bið drihtguman
unlifgendum æfter sēlest. (1387–9)

Let everyone who can gain
glory before death; that is afterwards best
for the unliving warrior.

Why fight a dragon

To die well, one must first of all take on the right kind of fight, and for the right reasons. As I noted in Chapter Two (p. 41), the only reasons the poem offers for Beowulf's fighting the dragon are revenge and seizure of treasure. The point is an important one, bearing on moral and political

²¹ *Battle of Maldon* 220–4: *Ne sceolon mē on þære þeode þegenas ætwitan / þæt ic of ðisse fyrde fēran wille, eard gesēcan* 'thegns in that country must not be able to charge that I wished to depart from this army and seek my home'.

arguments that have been prominent in criticism of the last part of the poem.

Klaeber mentions another motive for fighting the dragon, ‘the defense of the country’,²² but cites no lines in support of his statement. Kemp Malone writing in 1971, pointed to lines 2314–5, depicting part of the dragon’s attack, as supplying the missing evidence (I quote a bit more for context):

Ðā se gæst ongān glēdum spīwan,
 beorht hofu bærnān. Brynelēoma stōd
 eldum on andan; nō ðær āht cwices
 lāð lyftfloga lāfan wolde.
 Wæs þæs wyrmes wīg wide gesýne
 nearofāges nīð nēan ond feorran,
 hū se gūðsceaða Gēata lēode
 hatode ond hýnde. (2312–9)

Then the creature began to spit flames,
 to burn the bright dwellings. The firelight was
 a terror to the people; the hateful air-flyer
 did not mean to leave anything alive there.
 The serpent’s warfare was widely visible,
 the enmity of the hostile one, from near and far,
 how the warlike destroyer persecuted and humiliated
 the Geatish people.

Malone comments:

That is, the dragon had to be killed if Beowulf’s tribe was to survive. It was do or die for Beowulf and he took the only course open to him *qua* hero. If he had followed Wiglaf’s counsel (lines 3077 ff.) to do nothing, all would have been lost.²³

But surely he is reading more than is actually here. The text states clearly that the dragon means to kill everything it finds and that its anger is

²² *Beowulf*, note to l. 2336.

²³ ‘Review of Goldsmith, *Mode and Meaning*’, p. 370.

directed at the Geats, but the context for the statement is a description of the dragon's single attack, which does come to an end, as we see in the lines immediately following:

Hord eft gescēat
 dryhtsele dyrnne ær dāges hwīle.
 Hæfde landwara līge gefāngen
 bæle ond bronde; beorges getruwode
 wīges ond wealles. Him sēo wēn gelēah. (2319–24)

It hastened to its hoard,
 its secret hall, before daylight.
 It had encompassed the land-dwellers with fire,
 with burning and flame; it trusted in its barrow,
 its warfare and its wall. That expectation deceived it.

The dragon does not consider itself invulnerable; it has gone to ground in its secret barrow (hidden, it hopes, from men), adopting a defensive posture. If it means to attack again, then that is surely very bad news for the Geats, but the text does not say, and what we know about the habits of Anglo-Saxon dragons does not fill in the narrative gap.²⁴ A part of Wiglaf's speech cited by Malone is suggestive, though:

Ne meahton wē gelæran lēofne þēoden,
 rīces hyrde rād ænigne
 þæt hē ne grētte goldweard þone,
 lēte hyne licgean þær hē longe wæs,
 wīcum wunian oð woruldende. (3079–83)

We could not persuade our beloved lord,
 guardian of the realm, with any argument
 that he should not engage the guardian of gold,
 let him lie where he long had been,
 occupy his dwellings until the end of the world.

²⁴ For a comprehensive study of dragon lore in Anglo-Saxon England and elsewhere, see especially Rauer, *Beowulf and the Dragon*, and further J. Evans, 'As Rare As They Are Dire'.

The common understanding of these lines is that Wiglaf and other thegns believed, and tried to persuade Beowulf, that leaving the dragon alone was among the reasonable choices, and that if they had done so he would have lain quietly in his barrow until doomsday. But Mitchell and Robinson offer an alternative translation:

This has been taken to mean that the Geats tried to persuade Beowulf not to fight the dragon (but that he obstinately persisted in doing so). It could as well mean ‘We could not advise our dear lord, the king of the realm, that he should not engage the dragon (because we had no other defence against the dragon but him).’ They could not tell him ‘to let him (the dragon) lie where he long was, to remain in his dwelling until the world’s end’ because the dragon was determined to exterminate the Geats rather than remain in his den (ll. 2314b–15). The only other occurrence of *ræd gelēran* in *Beowulf* (l. 278) means ‘advise’, not ‘persuade’. (note to ll. 3079–83)

The Mitchell–Robinson reading is an attractive one which, if accepted, would make it easier to read ‘defense of the country’ as a motive for the dragon fight. However, it is not clear that ‘We could not advise our dear lord, the king of the realm, that he should not engage the dragon’ is a possible translation of 3079–81. The issue is not the meaning of *ræd gelēran*, which can indeed mean either ‘persuade’ or ‘advise’, both senses of the phrase being securely attested elsewhere.²⁵ Rather, the problem is with *ne meahton wē*, which Mitchell and Robinson translate ‘we could not’, using ‘could’ in a sense consistent with *MED* s.v. *connen* 2, ‘be justified or right (in doing sth.); be possible or right under the circumstances’. There is, as far as I have been able to ascertain, no such sense attested for Old English *magan* or any suitable sense in either the *MED* (s.v. *mouen*) or the *OED* (s.v. *may*).²⁶ The fairest translation of *ne meahton wē* would seem to be ‘we were not able to’, implying inability to do a thing (proven, in this case, by

²⁵ For example, Bately, *The Old English Orosius*, 98.9–10, 106.8, and *ASC* D, prologue.

²⁶ In the *OED*, the closest sense is II.17, ‘Expressing permission or sanction: was allowed (to do something) by authority, law, rule, morality, reason, etc.’ but all the examples are very far from what is proposed here. In the *MED* the closest match is 7a, ‘to be permitted (to do sth.), be allowed, may’; but this is also pretty far from the proposed reading.

an actual attempt). It is hardly conceivable that the Geatish thegns were unable to *advise* Beowulf to leave the dragon alone; anyone able to speak to the man could do that. But the translation 'we were unable to *persuade* him' makes sense in the narrative context.

Having said this, I must add that I have never taken Wiglaf's statement literally. This is one of two places where a character remembers giving advice to Beowulf, and in neither case is what the character claims to remember supported elsewhere in the text.²⁷ We may be looking at one of the poet's techniques for making characters express strong emotions, deployed without too strict a regard to narrative consistency.²⁸ Nevertheless, the passage does state, for what it's worth, that Wiglaf considers it possible that the dragon would have lain quietly on its treasure until doomsday had he and Beowulf left it alone. In his present state of mind he considers fighting the dragon to be a choice that did not have to be taken.

Then is it a mistake to fight the dragon? There are many points of view from which it is—one of them, it seems, the hindsight of a grieving thegn. But most early medieval kings, I suspect, would think it a serious mistake *not* to fight. A king who failed to engage an attacking army could expect soon to be paying tribute, or out of business altogether. Better, though, than the kind of defence that reacts to threats as they arise is preventive aggression. Reflecting on a long and successful reign, Hrothgar says,

Swā ic Hring-Dena hund missēra
wēold under wolcnum ond hig wigge belēac
manigum mægþa geond þysne middangeard
æscum ond ecgum, þæt ic mē ænigne
under swegles begong gesacan ne tealde. (1769–73)

So I ruled the Ring-Danes under the skies
for a hundred half-years, and by warfare,

²⁷ The other passage is 1992–7, where Higelac claims, after Beowulf's return from Denmark, that he pleaded with him not to go: see 202–4, which says that wise men did not discourage Beowulf from going, but rather encouraged him. It is possible to explain away such apparent inconsistencies, but only by resorting to awkward critical manoeuvres.

²⁸ See Fulk, Bjork, and Niles, *Klaeber's Beowulf*, p. lxxxix: the poet sometimes 'subordinated consistency to narrative effect'.

spears and sword-edges, protected them
 from many a nation, so that I did not consider
 anyone under the sun's orbit to be my adversary.

He secured the peace by making war. Beowulf's reflection, at his life's end, on the peacefulness of his reign has similar implications. No nation dared to attack him (2733–6)—and how, in a world where every king's fondest wish is to knock his neighbours off their mead benches and extort tribute from them, could he achieve that, if not by being as terrifying as Scyld or Hrothgar? That aggression is the surest path to a successful reign follows from everything we have said about the heroic economy, support of which requires a steady income of loot and honour. The historical record also bears us out: J. M. Wallace-Hadrill, surveying the kingdoms of the barbarian west, writes of peace as a condition that was ordinarily secured by 'a good deal of righteous battle'.²⁹ Even Alfred the Great, whom Wallace-Hadrill holds up as that rare sort of king who preferred peace to warfare (p. 169), looked back with something like nostalgia to times more blessed than his own, when kings both maintained domestic tranquility *ond ēac ūt hiora ēðel gerȳmdon* 'and also expanded their territory outwards'.³⁰ If Alfred's genius as a military leader seems chiefly defensive, that may be the role that conditions forced upon him, not the one he chose for himself. And for Alfred, an effective defence frequently involved offensive tactics—hunting down vikings at sea, harrying East Anglia or capturing the formerly Mercian city of London.³¹ The modern way of thinking about defence would seem unacceptably passive to an early medieval king, who had good reason to believe that if he did not play the predator he would surely end up as prey.

In stories (history helps us little here), some appear to consider fighting a monster optional where fighting an army is not: Hrólf Kraki, though a great king, orders his men not to oppose the troll that attacks each Yuletide. But on hearing this Bøðvar Bjarki cuttingly remarks, *Ekki er þollin svá vel skipuð sem ek ætlaði, ef eitt dýr skal hér eyða ríki ok fé konungsins* 'The hall is

²⁹ 'War and Peace', p. 165.

³⁰ Sweet, *King Alfred's West-Saxon Version*, 3.7–8.

³¹ Abels, *Alfred the Great*, pp. 171–6.

not so well manned as I had thought, if one animal alone could destroy the king's lands and his livestock'.³² The cost in honour of passivity being great, it seems better for a king who cares about his reputation to do something about the monsters that visit his kingdom. It is a good idea to succeed, too: the Danes' futile efforts to fight Grendel cost them many lives and leave them open to Beowulf's taunts (480–8, 595–602). For the *Beowulf* poet, I suspect, the principle is so fundamental that it hardly needs saying: a king should always fight a dragon and attempt to seize its treasure. Frothi I and Fridlev of Saxo's *Gesta Danorum*, and also Þiðrek of *Þiðreks Saga af Bern*, all notable kings, confront their dragons without hesitation and escape criticism by emerging from battle both alive and in possession of great wealth.³³ It is Beowulf's *hēahgesceap* 'high nature' (3084), as Wiglaf understands despite his grief, to confront his dragon as well.

From the point of view adopted in this study (there are others) we can dismiss any suggestion that Beowulf is guilty of greed.³⁴ Recall that in the Economy of Honour as outlined in Chapter Two, it is bad to desire wealth for its own sake but praiseworthy to desire it for good purposes, one of these being to acquire honour. Further, it is a kingly duty to maintain the national hoard of treasure and honour; there is no distinction to be made between the king's personal wealth and the national treasury. Beowulf shows that he has not forgotten the right uses of treasure when he speaks just moments before his death:

³² Slay, *Hrólfs Saga Kraka*, p. 78; spelling normalized, and the emendation of *ef* to *ad* is rejected. Trans. Byock, *Saga of King Hrolf Kraki*, p. 50.

³³ J. Olrik and Ræder, *Saxonis Gesta Danorum*, II.i.1–3: i.36–7; VI.iv.10: i.150; Davidson, *History of the Danes*, i. 40–1, 169. Bertelsen, *Þiðreks Saga af Bern*, ch. 418: ii. 361–3; trans. Haymes, *Saga of Thidrek of Bern*, pp. 254–5.

³⁴ The classic statement of the position that the dragon's hoard presents Beowulf with a temptation to avarice, and that he succumbs to this temptation, is Goldsmith, *Mode and Meaning*, especially pp. 226–30. For incisive comments on Goldsmith and several other critics, see Davis, *Beowulf and the Demise of Germanic Legend*, pp. 175–8. I suspect that many Anglo-Saxon readers (especially clerics) read *Beowulf* the way Goldsmith does, many read it the way I am doing, and some managed to hold both points of view simultaneously. An especially trenchant analysis of *Beowulf* from a clerical point of view is Bolton, *Alcuin and Beowulf*.

Ic ðāra frætwa Frēan ealles ðanc,
 Wuldurcyninge wordum secge
 ēcum Dryhtne, þe ic hēr on starie,
 þæs ðe ic mōste mīnum lēodum
 ār swyltdæge swylc gestrȳnan. (2793–8)

I say thanks to the Lord with my words,
 to the King of Glory, the eternal Lord,
 for all the adornments that I am looking at here,
 that I have been able, before my death,
 to acquire this for my people.

He is not like Heremod, who acted as if the nation's treasury were his alone (see above, pp. 56–7): he has won the dragon's hoard for his people.³⁵

The charge that it is inappropriate for an aged king to attempt the kind of heroics that Beowulf engaged in as a young man is a more serious one than that of greed. The idea goes at least as far back as the essay 'Ofermod' appended to Tolkien's 'The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm's Son', which compares Byrhtnoth's disastrous decision to allow the vikings to cross the river in *The Battle of Maldon* to Beowulf's decision to fight the dragon. As a youth, Tolkien writes, Beowulf 'does more than he need', and it is all right because 'he is still a subordinate with no responsibilities downwards'.

Yet he does not rid himself of his chivalry, the excess persists, even when he is an old king upon whom all the hopes of a people rest. He will not deign to lead a force against the dragon, as wisdom might direct even a hero to do; for, as he explains in a long 'vaunt', his many victories have relieved him of fear. He will only use a sword on this occasion, since wrestling singlehanded with a dragon is too hopeless even for the chivalric spirit. But he dismisses his twelve companions. He is saved from defeat, and the essential object, destruction of the dragon, only achieved by the loyalty of a subordinate. Beowulf's chivalry would otherwise have ended in his own useless death, with the dragon still at large. As it is, a subordinate is placed in greater

³⁵ For an interesting argument concerning the correct use of treasure in a Christian context, see Marshall, 'Goldgyfan or Goldw lance'.

peril than he need have been, and though he does not pay the penalty of his master's *mod* with his own life, the people lose their king disastrously. (pp. 14–15)

Some seventeen years after 'Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics', Tolkien no longer regards Beowulf's death as a 'defeat', but he does think it a tragedy that ought to have been avoided.

In a frequently cited article published in 1965, John Leyerle develops this charge of Beowulfian irresponsibility, arguing that the central theme of *Beowulf* is a 'fatal contradiction at the core of heroic society. The hero follows a code that exalts indomitable will and valour in the individual, but society requires a king who acts for the common good, not for his own glory.'³⁶ According to Leyerle, each Beowulfian monster is less evil than the one before, and with each fight Beowulf's pride increases, despite Hrothgar's warnings (1700–84), which can be paralleled in the works of such authors as Sedulius Scottus and Thomas Aquinas. This pride, though 'understandable', 'leads to a national calamity by leaving his race without mature leadership at a time of extreme crisis, facing human enemies much more destructive than the dragon' (pp. 101–2). Leyerle's argument and variants of it have had great staying power, numerous articles and books locating the root of Beowulf's tragedy in the hero or the heroic.³⁷

Perhaps one place to begin discussion of this line of critical inquiry is with the observation that any nation whose existence depends upon the continued health of an aged king, one who has exceeded the average life expectancy of his era by some fifty years, is already in deep trouble. The future of the Geatish nation looks much the same whether Beowulf is killed by the dragon or dies of old age, as must happen soon. One might continue by pointing out that most Anglo-Saxon kings risked their lives in battle and not a few got themselves killed. Richard Abels tells us that 'Of the eight kings who ruled Northumbria in the seventh century, six perished in war.'³⁸ Though seventh-century Northumbria seems to have

³⁶ 'Beowulf the Hero and King', p. 89.

³⁷ For a quick summary, and references to some of the major essays, see Clark, 'The Hero and the Theme', p. 280. The most significant recent argument along these lines is Gwara, *Heroic Identity*, pp. 239–309.

³⁸ Abels, *Lordship and Military Obligation*, p. 12.

been an especially rough neighbourhood, the roll of other kings who died in battle is a long one, including, for example, Osred (d. 716) and Osric (d. 731) of Northumbria, Penda (d. 655) and Beornwulf (d. 826) of Mercia, Anna (d. 654) and Eadmund (d. 869) of East Anglia, Cynewulf (d. 786) and Æthelred I (d. 871) of Wessex, and of course Harold Godwinson (d. 1066). Each of these deaths deprived a nation of 'mature leadership' at a time when it faced dangerous enemies; each was a catastrophe in its own way. Presumably the decision of Anglo-Saxon kings to risk death in battle was not as irrational as it must seem to most modern readers, for whom the image of a head of state driving a tank or piloting a fighter jet is likely to be ludicrous, if not disturbing. The gain to the nation from a king leading his troops into battle must have exceeded the risk of loss. We need to understand this aspect of the heroic economy.

Richard Abels opens his study of the Anglo-Saxon military with this memorable statement:

War was endemic to the kingdoms of seventh- and eighth-century Britain. An Anglo-Saxon ruler of this period was above all else a warlord, a *dryhten*, as the Old English sources put it. His primary duty was to protect his people against the depredations of their neighbors and to lead them on expeditions of plunder and conquest.³⁹

Though the institution of Anglo-Saxon kingship evolved over the centuries, it is still possible to say of ninth-, tenth- and eleventh-century kings that they saw themselves, first and foremost, as military leaders. The nobility that served them was a warrior class, military service being both the invariable duty of every nobleman and the ultimate source of his privileges. None of this is news, but every now and then it is worth reminding ourselves how fundamental violence was to early medieval concepts of self and state. And although theologians like Bede and political theorists like the Carolingians Sedulius Scottus and Smaragdus of St-Mihiel (both cited by Leyerle) made some efforts to moderate the warlike tendencies

³⁹ *Ibid.* p. 11.

of kings,⁴⁰ still secular rule remained, whether by necessity or choice, a violent business.

Beowulf offers an idealized picture of how kings acquire and maintain power through generosity and vaguely defined *lofdædum* 'praiseworthy deeds' (20–5), but for Anglo-Saxon kings those deeds were often violent. Stephen of Ripon tells how Ceadwalla came to rule the West Saxons *occis et superatis inimicis* 'by having killed and conquered his foes',⁴¹ and the savagery of his conquests of Sussex and Wight is well known (above, pp. 50–2). The early reigns of Ecgfrith of Northumbria and Offa of Mercia seem to have been similar in character, and probably much the same could be said of many kings, if our documentation were fuller.⁴² Hrothgar's early reign sounds like those of Ceadwalla, Ecgfrith and Offa, though it is only vaguely described (64–7). First he achieves *herespēd* 'military success', presumably fighting alongside a relatively small band of retainers. Then his kinsmen, both awed and attracted by his strength, are glad to obey him; and finally his *geoguð* 'band of young retainers' grows as he acquires the means to reward them with rich gifts. Thus his successful reign is built upon a foundation of force and generosity, both of which are necessary in the political system and, as we have seen (above, p. 57), similar in function.

The king's willingness to perform violent acts with his own hands and to take on risk while doing so is not only a threat, but also a benefit to his followers—a point implicit in the arguments of Chapters Two and Three.

⁴⁰ See Yorke, *Conversion of Britain*, p. 232: 'Bede was clearly concerned that there should be a recognition of Christian rules of engagement in war and that the innocent who were especially under God's protection—women, children, the old and infirm, and churches—should not have to suffer its consequences.' The influence of Carolingian authors like Sedulius and Smaragdus on Anglo-Saxon kings is unclear. For an account of Carolingian political theory, see Doyle, *Sedulius Scottus On Christian Rulers and the Poems*, pp. 18–26. Sedulius's *De rectoribus christianis* appears to have been known to Ælfric (see the records in *Fontes Anglo-Saxonici*), and Alcuin wrote many letters of advice to kings. Smaragdus's *Via regia*, on the other hand, appears not to have been known.

⁴¹ Colgrave, *Life of Bishop Wilfrid*, p. 84.

⁴² See Colgrave, *Life of Bishop Wilfrid*, pp. 40–3; the *Baedae Continuatio* for 757 in Plummer, *Venerabilis Baedae Opera Historica*, i. 362; Williams, *Kingship and Government*, pp. 32–6.

It is as true for a king as for anyone else that accepting risk increases one's honour (above, p. 91); further, since a subject and the objects he possesses—things worth giving as gifts—are commensurable (above, p. 62), the value of a king's gifts increases as his own honour increases. One who gives a gift passes on some of his honour to the recipient (above, pp. 58, 61); as the king's honour increases, then, so does that of each retainer who receives his gifts. Thus in the heroic system of exchange, the Economy of Honour, any retainer will value a ring or sword from a fighting king, one who has himself won great honour, more than one from a king who manages a far-off war from the safety of his hall. Ambitious warriors always flock to the courts of such kings because that is where they can acquire the greatest honour for themselves.

In Norse literature the stay-at-home king invites contempt, as one can see in the *flyting*, which sometimes pits one king against another, and where about the worst charge a verbal combatant can fling is slackness, the unwillingness to fight.⁴³ In Saxo's *Gesta Danorum*, slackness is the theme of Starcath's rant against Ingell, who has been partying with his father's killers instead of taking revenge.⁴⁴ Slackness is the first charge that Beowulf makes against Unferth (581–3). As for himself, the aged Beowulf takes pride in always having been at the front of every battle and in his resolution to remain a fighting king to the end (2497–500). Criticisms of this position are hard to find in Anglo-Saxon and contemporary sources. In his 'Wyrðwriteras' Ælfric cites biblical and ancient precedent in favour of kings delegating their war-making powers to generals, including a story of how the Israelites resolved never to let King David go to battle lest he endanger his life. Ælfric may, as W. Braekman suggested, be defending Æthelræd against criticism that, unlike his predecessors, he did not lead his own troops in battle; if so Ælfric's seems a lonely voice, speaking against conventional wisdom.⁴⁵ Leyerle cites the poem *In honorem Hludowici* by

⁴³ Clover, 'Hárbarðsljóð as Generic Farce', 'The Germanic Context of the Unferþ Episode'.

⁴⁴ J. Olrik and Ræder, *Saxonis Gesta Danorum*, VI.vi–ix: i.158–18; Davidson, *History of the Danes*, i. 177–95.

⁴⁵ 'Wyrðwriteras us secgað' (Pope, *Homilies of Ælfric*, xxii.37–50). See also Braekman, 'Wyrðwriteras', pp. 963–4 and Keynes, *Diplomas of King Æthelred*, pp. 206–8.

Ermold the Black as evidence for Charlemagne's conviction that it would be bad for his people to expose himself to danger.⁴⁶ But Ermold says no such thing. In the section of the poem cited by Leyerle, Charlemagne tells his followers that he no longer goes to battle because he is too old and feeble. And far from claiming that he is indispensable, his great concern is to prepare his empire to get along without him.⁴⁷ Einhard writes that Charlemagne personally conducted many of his own campaigns until well into the 790s (when he was in his fifties), though he also delegated some to his sons.⁴⁸ In this he is typical of early medieval kings who were lucky enough to grow old: they stopped fighting when bodily infirmity forced them to do so.⁴⁹

In hindsight, as hardship looms, the arguments against Beowulf's decision to fight the dragon seem compelling. But it is worth considering what the payoff would have been for the risk that he has taken. Had he lived, he would have been a triumphant king in possession of a dragon's hoard, having done a thing that few before him had done. The value of the treasure in honour would have been incalculable, and he would have distributed treasure and honour to his favoured thegns, who could carry it with enormous pride in serving a king who was capable of such a deed. And in truth, much of this has been accomplished: the Geats' new king begins his reign as a dragonslayer; he possesses the treasure and great honour, and he could, if he wished, use it to reward his thegns. As for Beowulf, he does not sound like a defeated man as he gazes at the dragon's treasure (2794–8). He needs no valkyrie to explain to him that he has won a notable victory.

The precious corpse

Though he is *sigebrēðig* 'glorious in victory' (2756), Wiglaf does not claim to have won honour in the dragon fight (2877–82), and no other Geat

⁴⁶ Leyerle, 'Beowulf the Hero and King', pp. 99–100.

⁴⁷ See Noble, *Charlemagne and Louis the Pious*, pp. 142–3.

⁴⁸ Halphen, *Eginhard: Vie de Charlemagne* ch. 5–15.

⁴⁹ On the problem of aging kings, see Paul Edward Dutton's chapter 'A World Grown Old' (*Charlemagne's Mustache*, pp. 151–67), and on Ermold especially p. 157.

has won honour either.⁵⁰ Accordingly, he decides that the dragon's hoard will not adorn the bodies of the living, but rather be buried with Beowulf (3010–17). The treatment of the hoard is one of the darker features of the poem's dark end.

In *The Four Funerals of Beowulf*, Gale R. Owen-Crocker makes a striking observation about the passage of the poem usually called The Lament of the Last Survivor (2233–70), in which *gumena nāthwylc* 'some man or other', the last survivor of a noble people entirely wiped out by warfare, addresses the earth as he buries their immense treasure. The passage, Owen-Crocker argues, depicts a funeral, the third of four in the poem, the first being that of Scyld Scefing (26–52), the second that of Hnæf with his sister's son (1107–24), and the fourth and last that of Beowulf (3137–82).⁵¹ This 'third funeral' differs from the other three in that no human body is buried: 'ostensibly only the treasure is being deposited, because, as the Last Survivor says, there was no one left alive to look after or enjoy it' (p. 84).

This idea has, as Owen-Crocker writes, important implications for our view of the structure of *Beowulf*. It also has implications for our understanding of the nature of the dragon's treasure and the way it operates in the dragon episode. For in light of the arguments in Chapter Two, especially those concerning the commensurability of human subjects and the objects they possess (and groups and the objects they own collectively), it is an easy step to read the Last Survivor's treasure as the corpse that has seemed to be missing in this burial.

The treasure behaves like a corpse underground—it decomposes. The Last Survivor predicts the treasure's decay as he places it in the barrow, comparing it to the body of a man:

Sceal se hearda helm hyrstedgolde
fætum befeallen; feormynd swefað
þā ðe beadogriman bȳwan sceoldon.

⁵⁰ On the unworthiness of the cowardly Geatish thegns to keep the treasure, see Niles, *Old English Heroic Poems*, pp. 221–2.

⁵¹ All four funerals are discussed in detail in her book; for the third, see Chapter Four, pp. 61–84.

Ge swylce sēo herepād sīo æt hilde gebād
ofer borda gebræc bite īrena
brosnað æfter beorne. (2255–60)

The hard helmet must be deprived of its adorned
and plated gold; the tenders sleep
who should be polishing the battle-mask.
And likewise the mail coat, which in battle endured
the bite of iron swords over the crash of shields,
will decay like the warrior.⁵²

What he has predicted comes about over three centuries, or maybe ten (2278, 3050). Then, after the dragon-fight, Wiglaf hurries into the barrow to fetch some treasure to show his dying king, and he notices the decay:

Geseah ðā sigehrēðig, þā hē bi sesse gēong,
magoþegn mōdig, . . .
fyrnmanna fatu feormendlēase,
hyrstum behrorene; þær wæs helm monig
eald ond ōmig, earmbēaga fela
searwum gesæled. (2756–7, 2761–4)

The victorious one, the brave thegn saw,
as he passed by the seat, . . .
the cups of ancient men, without tenders,
their ornaments fallen off; there was many a helmet
old and rusty, many arm-rings
ingeniously bound.

With no one to tend the treasure its ornaments have fallen away, and things that can rust have rusted. Yet the gold and gems remain bright and the fine workmanship is evident; it is still beautiful. Its decayed condition is also visible to the Geatish warriors who go to view their fallen king and the dragon, with the treasure lying beside them:

⁵² I recommend that *æfter* in l. 2260 be translated 'in the manner of', a sense well attested in Old English. Other suggested translations are 'in consequence of, on account of' (Fulk, Bjork, and Niles, *Klaeber's Beowulf*) and 'after, as a result of' (Mitchell and Robinson, *Beowulf*).

Him big stōdan bunan ond orcas,
 discas lāgon ond dýre swyrd,
 ōmige, þurhetone, swā hīe wið eorðan fæðm
 þūsend wintra þær eardodon. (3047–50)

By them stood cups and bowls,
 dishes lay there and precious swords,
 rusty and eaten through, as they had remained
 in the earth's embrace for a thousand winters.

The choice of words to describe the treasure's condition is interesting. The verb *brosnian* 'decay' (2259) and related words can be used, as here, of the decay of inanimate objects, but more often of bodies.⁵³ *Ōmig* 'rusty' (2763, 3049) belongs to a family of words whose base meaning has to do with the colour red; it can be used of rust, but also of bodily infirmities: inflamed skin, running sores, scabrousness and decay.⁵⁴ An even more suggestive word, also used of bodies, is *þurhetone*, past participle of the verb *þurhetan* 'eat through'. In *Soul and Body* it supplies one of the most vivid images in a famously harrowing description of the body's decomposition:

Gifer hātte se wyrm þām þā geaflas bēoð
 nǣdle scearpran. Se genēpeð tō
 ærest ealra on þām eorðscræfe;
 hē þā tungan tōtyhð ond þā tōpas þurhsmýhð
 ond þā ēagan þurhiteð ufon on þæt hēafod
 ond tō ætwelan oþrum gerýmeð
 wýrmum tō wiste.

That worm is called Glutton whose jaws are
 sharper than needles. It ventures forth
 first of them all in the earthen sepulchre,
 so that it tears the tongue and bores through the teeth
 and eats through the eyes up into the head
 and for others opens the way to food-wealth,
 a feast for worms.⁵⁵

⁵³ See DOE, svv. *brosnian*, *gebrosnian*, *brośniendlic*, *gebrosniendlic*, *brosnung*, *gebrosnung*.

⁵⁴ See BT, svv. *healsóme*, *óman*, *ómcynn*, *ómian*, *ómig*, *ómiht* in dictionary and supplement.

⁵⁵ Quotation from the Exeter Book text: Moffat, *The Old English Soul and Body*, ll. 116–22.

The similarity between the two descriptions of decay—that of the body in its *eorðscræf* ‘earthen sepulchre’ and of the dragon’s treasure in its *eorðscræf* (3046)—is striking, but as expected: both bodies and treasures decay in the earth, especially when a worm forces its way into the burial place. As the gospel says, *nolite thesaurizare uobis thesauros in terra, ubi erugo et tinea demolitur, ubi fures effodiunt et furantur* (Matthew 6:19)—a passage that the Rushworth glossator understood as referring to buried treasure: *ne hȳdeþ ēow hord in eorþe, þær ōm and mohþa gewyrfeþ uel etaþ and þær ðiofes ādelfaþ and forstelap* ‘do not hide a hoard for yourself in the earth, where rust and worms corrupt (or eat) it and where thieves dig it up and steal it’.⁵⁶

Old English *moððe* can be used of certain worms, but not of dragons; *wyrm*, on the other hand, is used of dragons, serpents, and the worms that eat the flesh of the dead, related concepts in medieval writings. This is no surprise: apart from the similarity in shape of worms and dragons, so that St Augustine (for example) finds them convenient examples of small and

⁵⁶ Skeat, *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, p. 57. The Douay-Rheims translation minimizes the likelihood that the verse refers to buried treasure: ‘Lay not up to yourselves treasures on earth, where the rust and moth consume and where thieves break through and steal.’ In this particular the translation in the Old English Gospels agrees with the Rushworth gloss: *Nellen gē goldbordian ēow goldbordas on eorþan, þær ōm and moððe his fornimð, and þær ðeofas bit delfað and forstelap* (Liuzza, *The Old English Version of the Gospels*, p. 13). The Lindisfarne glossator, on the other hand, translates *effodiunt* as *ofdelfes uel hrypes* ‘digs up or plunders’ (Skeat, p. 57). The Rushworth Gospel gloss also translates *erugo* with *ōm* (where the Lindisfarne gloss has *rust*—*ibid.*). Old English *moððe* typically translates Latin *tinea*; in both Old and Middle English it can be used of ‘[a]ny of various destructive or parasitic invertebrates, as maggots, worms, insect pests, etc.’ (*OED* s.v. moth, I.1); however, Latin *tinea* refers mainly (though not exclusively) to the moths that eat clothing: see e.g. Isidore’s *Etymologies* (Lindsay, *Etymologiarum libri xx*, XII.v.11, 18). Ælfric quotes this passage in connection with almsgiving in *Dominica .i. in Quadragesima*, the same homily cited in Chapter Three (above, pp. 83–4—Godden, *Catholic Homilies II*, vii.104–5; cf. Pope, *Homilies of Ælfric*, xvi.161). Gregory brings together notions of treasure (the light of God) and the body, subject to destruction, as a house of clay is destroyed by *tinea*, in *Moralia in Iob* I.v.38 (Adriaen, *S. Gregorii Magni Moralia in Iob*, i.267–70). In general the comparison I am urging between treasure and bodies buried in the earth is not characteristic of early medieval theology.

big animals,⁵⁷ Old English homilists seem to have thought of *wyrmas* and *dracan* as similar in function. The anonymous author of a Rogationtide homily, rendering Mark 9:43, *ubi uermis eorum non moritur et ignis non extinguatur* ‘where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not extinguished’, adds a dragon:

for ðan ðe helle fȳr nǣfre ne byð ādwāsced, ac þā dracan and þā wyrmas
þǣra ārlēasra manna sǣwla slītað, and hī nǣfre nā bēoð sweltende.

because the fire of hell will never be extinguished, but the dragons and the
worms will tear the souls of the impious men, and they will never die.⁵⁸

Likewise in an unsourced passage from Vercelli Homily IV, the worm and the dragon, who is Satan himself, torment those guilty of practising witchcraft,⁵⁹ and in *Christ and Satan* the worm, dragon and serpent also administer the torments of hell:

Nabbað hīe tō hyhte nymþe cyle and fȳr,
wēan and wītu and wyrma þrēat,
dracan and nǣddran and þone dimman hām. (334–6)

They have nothing to hope for but cold and fire,
sorrow and torments and a host of worms,
the dragon and the serpent and the dark abode.

For Ælfric, worms (apparently including biting insects), serpents and dragons are among the annoyances that must be endured by postlapsarian man.⁶⁰

The worm as agent of bodily decay appears frequently in late ancient and early medieval Christian literature, quite generally as a *memento mori*,

⁵⁷ *De ciuitate dei* xi.27: *animalia omnia . . . ab immensis draconibus usque ad exiguos uermiculos* ‘all animals . . . from immense dragons to tiny worms’ (ed. Dombart and Kalb, i. 552).

⁵⁸ Bazire and Cross, *Eleven Old English Rogationtide Homilies*, p. 52.

⁵⁹ Scragg, *Vercelli Homilies*, iv.45–7. For the dragon as Satan, see Ephesians 6:12; and cf. *Solomon and Saturn*, l. 27.

⁶⁰ S. J. Crawford, *Exameron Anglice*, p. 68, ll. 459–64; *De falsis diis* (Pope, *Homilies of Ælfric*, xxi.34–48).

a reminder that our bodily existence and our enjoyment of the goods of the world must eventually come to an end. For Anglo-Saxon homilists one of the most striking expressions of the theme was Caesarius of Arles's sermon *De elemosinis*, famous for the passage in which *ossa arida* 'dry bones' speak from the grave.⁶¹ Worms are also prominent in the sermon; the part that mentions them is worth quoting at length because it touches on several themes relevant to the present study:

Fratres dilectissimi, si laboramus pro carne nostra, laboremus et pro anima nostra: si currimus pro carne, satiamus carnem, ornamus carnem, quam post paucos annos aut forsitan dies uermes deuoraturi sunt in sepulchro, quanto magis non debemus despicere animam, quae deo et angelis praesentatur in caelo? Cogitemus, fratres, quia quando caro copiosis deliciis satiatur, et abundanti uino nimis inficitur, pabulum luxuriae ministratur, et esca uermium prouidetur. Rogo uos, fratres, aspiciate ad sepulchra diuitum, et quotiens iuxta illa transitis, considerate et diligenter inspicite, ubi sunt illorum diuitiae, ubi ornamenta, ubi anuli uel inaures, ubi diademata pretiosa, ubi honorum uanitas, ubi luxoriae uoluptas, ubi spectacula uel furiosa uel cruenta uel turpia. Certe transierunt omnia tamquam umbra; et si paenitentia non subuenerit, sola in perpetuum obprobria et crimina remanserunt. Considerate diligentius et uidete superbiorum sepulchra, et agnoscite quia nihil in eis aliud nisi soli cineres et foetidae uermium reliquiae remanserunt.

If we work for the body, dearly beloved, let us also work for our soul. If we hasten for the body, satisfy it, adorn it, even though in a few years [or perhaps days] worms will devour it in the grave, how much more should we not disdain our soul which is presented to God and the angels in heaven? Let us consider, brethren, that when the body is satisfied with abundant delights and corrupted with too much wine, the nourishment of dissipation is served and the food of worms provided. I beseech you, brethren, look at the graves of the rich, and as often as you pass them reflect and carefully see where their riches are, where their ornaments, rings, earrings, precious diadems, the vanity of honors, the pleasure of dissipation, their mad or bloody or shameful spectacles. Certainly they have all passed like a shadow, and,

⁶¹ See Cross, '*The Dry Bones Speak*', and Scragg's introduction to Vercelli Homily XIII (p. 233).

unless repentance came to the rescue, only endless reproaches and crimes have remained. Consider more carefully and behold the graves of the proud; realize that nothing has remained in them but only ashes and the stinking remains of worms.⁶²

Caesarius's vision of worms devouring the flesh is compelling enough to have been adopted by at least two Old English homilists who summarized this portion of the sermon.⁶³ But as prominent in the sermon as the body's decay is the perishability of the things with which we feed, please and adorn it: food, drink, amusements and jewellery. One ought to prefer the eternal rewards of heaven. *Honorum uanitas* 'the vanity of honours' is also perishable. Caesarius's concept of honour is not a perfect match for the heroic variety that this study has been concerned with, including as it does (in Roman fashion) offices and awards as well as the esteem of others; but the honour of the sermon and that of *Beowulf* share the property of perishability.

The treasure deposited by the Last Survivor once embodied the honour of the noble nation that possessed it. The identity of that nation has been forgotten, and its honour cannot survive such forgetfulness, even though the treasure remains. As the treasure decays like a corpse, so also the honour that it once embodied decays until nothing of it is left. One way to look at the dragon is as an agent of this decay, analogous to the worm that eats the body. Unlike the worm, the dragon does not cause the physical decay of the treasure, but rather the destruction of the honour associated with it, which its decay symbolizes. The dragon takes over the treasure *unrihte* 'unjustly' (3059), not having earned the right to it by defeating and killing those who had it before, and he is none the better for it (2277) since he acquired no honour in getting it and acquires none by keeping it. Over the centuries during which the identity and accomplishments of its original owners are forgotten, the treasure becomes all value and no significance—quite the opposite of, say, Grendel's arm, which is all significance

⁶² Sermon XXXI (Morin, *Caesarii sermones*, p. 135); trans. Mueller, *Caesarius of Arles: Sermons*, pp. 153–4. The addition in square brackets brings the translation into agreement with the Latin text.

⁶³ 'The Transience of Earthly Delights' (Irvine, *Old English Homilies*, pp. vii.1–21) and Blickling X (see below).

and no value (above, p. 40). By the time Beowulf contends for the dragon's treasure, its value in honour has fallen to zero.

'So much for the orthodox position', as Patrick Wormald wrote in another connection.⁶⁴ Looking at the same material from another angle yields quite a different reading. Caesarius's sermon contains an *ubi sunt* passage—that is, a series of questions asking where the worldly goods of departed persons have gone. Such passages have long been recognized as popular sources for Old English sermons.⁶⁵ The passage from Caesarius's *De elemosinis*, quoted above, was adapted in Blickling Homily X:

Hwær bēoþ þonne his welan and his wista? Hwær bēoð þonne his wlencea and his anmēðlan? Hwær bēoþ þonne his īðlan gescyrplan? Hwær bēoþ ðonne þā glengeas and þā mycclan gegyrelan þe hē þone lichoman ær mid frætweode? Hwær cumað þonne his willan and his fyrenlustas ðe hē hēr on worlde beēode?⁶⁶

Where then are his wealth and his feasts? Where then are his pride and his arrogance? Where then are his vain garments? Where then are the ornaments and the fine clothing with which he formerly adorned his body? Where then have gone the pleasures and lusts that he practised here in the world?

A consistent feature of such *ubi sunt* passages in homilies is their scornful condemnation of worldly goods and pleasures: these are occasions of sin and even crime, and anyone who cares more about his soul than his body must shun them. But in *The Wanderer*, which famously adopts the *ubi sunt* topos, none of the contempt remains:

Hwær cwōm mearg? Hwær cwōm mago? Hwær cwōm mǣþþum-gyfa?

Hwær cwōm symbla gesetu? Hwær sindon seledrēamas?

Ēalā beorht bune! Ēalā byrnwiga!

Ēalā þēodnes þrym! Hū sēo þræg gewāt,

⁶⁴ Wormald, 'Bede, *Beowulf*', p. 47.

⁶⁵ A number of *ubi sunt* passages were identified and sourced by Cross, "Ubi sunt" Passages in Old English'; a good recent study is Di Sciacca, 'The *Ubi Sunt* Motif'.

⁶⁶ R. Morris, *The Blickling Homilies*, x.91–6.

genāp under nihthelm, swā hēo nō wære. (92–6)

Where is the horse? Where the kinsman? Where the treasure-giver?

Where is the seat at the feast? Where are the joys of the hall?

Alas, bright cup! Alas, warrior in mail!

Alas, royal host! How the time has departed,
darkened under night's helm as if it had never been.

As pointed out long ago by Rosemary Woolf, the effect of the *ubi sunt* topos here is to make the good things of this world—people, treasure and the joys associated with them—seem more rather than less precious, quite the reverse of what the homilists intended.⁶⁷ The Lament of the Last Survivor owes as much as *The Wanderer* to the sermon tradition represented by our passage from Caesarius. While the *Beowulf* poet has attended to the preaching of his time closely enough to be well aware of the danger to the soul,⁶⁸ he seems to agree more with the *Wanderer* poet than with Caesarius about the value of worldly goods—that it is good to have them, sad when they're gone. Neither poet can bring himself to speak of them as evils that one is better off without.

If the sermon writers agree that wealth and honour are perishable, the heroic poets are not so sure. As to honour, *Hávamál* famously says that though the self dies, *orðzstírr deyr aldregi / hveim er sér góðan getr* 'the words of praise will not perish when a man wins fair fame'.⁶⁹ And as honour and treasure are bonded and hardly separable, preserving the treasure also goes a long way towards preserving the honour. Thus many characters, such as the *haugbúir* 'mound-dwellers, spirits of the dead' in Icelandic saga,⁷⁰ can go to great lengths to make sure no one else gets hold of it. *Úlfur mun ráða arfi Niflunga* 'The wolf shall rule the inheritance of the Niflungar', promises Gunnar as he sets out for Atli's court (*Atlakviða* 11), and later we

⁶⁷ R. Woolf, 'The Wanderer, The Seafarer, and the Genre of Planctus', p. 201.

⁶⁸ It is a theme in Hrothgar's lecture to Beowulf after the defeat of Grendel's mother (1687–1784), and see also 2764–6.

⁶⁹ Neckel and H. Kuhn, *Edda*, verse 76; trans. Terry, *Poems of the Elder Edda*, p. 21.

⁷⁰ The classic example of the treasure-guarding *haugbúi* is Kár the Old in *Grettis Saga*, ch. 18.

learn that he has sunk it in the Rhine where Atli will never find it (27). So should a king defend his gold! The intention of the Last Survivor in burying the treasure must also be to ensure that the honour of his nation survives his demise: else why not leave it out in the open for anyone to take?⁷¹ A good hiding place is not the treasure's only protection: powerful curses placed by his people deter thieves, and the dragon may also be read as a successor-in-interest to these people, continuing their determination to preserve their honour—until one whom God favours opens the hoard and wins the treasure (3074–5).⁷²

The two readings I am offering of the dragon, the treasure, and the honour of the Last Survivor's lost nation are admittedly incompatible, but neither is less valid for that. The dragon is agent of both the treasure's decay and its preservation. The Last Survivor's nation is forgotten along with their honour, which yet remains embodied in their treasure. And the treasure itself expresses these paradoxes, being beautiful and decayed, precious and useless to men.

Wiglaf declines the use of the treasure either on his own behalf or on

⁷¹ Not everyone agreed that removing treasure from circulation was the right thing to do. Saxo Grammaticus tells how Andwanus sank his treasure in the sea to prevent his enemies from seizing it, *quamquam satius fuerat aduersariorum fauorem pecuniae largitionibus occupare quam eius commodum mortalitatis usibus inuidere* 'though it would have been more satisfactory to capture his adversaries' good-will by gifts of money than grudge mankind the advantage of its use' (J. Olrik and Ræder, *Saxonis Gesta Danorum*, II.i.9: i.38–9; Davidson, *History of the Danes*, i. 43). For other reasons to remove treasure from circulation see Tarzia, 'The Hoarding Ritual'.

⁷² The literature concerning the curse on the dragon's hoard is enormous: for a recent take, with ample bibliography, see Cooke, 'Who Cursed Whom, and When?' Cooke's argument that the curse was placed by the Geats when they deposited the hoard in Beowulf's burial mound is compelling and quite likely to be right; for the purposes of the present argument, however, I have stayed with the reading I have always given the relevant passages, that the curse was placed by representatives of the lost nation, and that Beowulf was able to win the hoard because he was favoured by God. J. Evans, 'As Rare As They Are Dire', pp. 248–61 surveys the common Norse motif in which a deceased man becomes a monster or dragon that guards the treasure in his burial mound. The dragon in *Beowulf* is not to be taken as a transformation of the Last Survivor (though G. V. Smithers understood it that way—see *ibid.* p. 259), but it may be understood that way at the symbolic level.

that of the nation he now leads. The treasure belongs to Beowulf, who has restored its honour by defeating the dragon and, favoured by God, has won the honour that formerly belonged to the lost nation. The third funeral is performed again as the fourth funeral, that of Beowulf, with the same treasure but with different meaning: for the one buries the memory of a nation while the other preserves the memory of a great man—though no one can say for how long. The treasure will again become a precious corpse in the ground, this time as grave goods accompanying the ashes of the man whose honour it measures and whose deeds it honours. It will continue to decompose, whether or not a dragon comes.

The fate of the Geats

Mors regum miseriae signum est ‘the death of kings is a sign of coming misery’. So wrote Alcuin (in words that have sometimes been associated with the dark ending of *Beowulf*), alluding to the deaths in 796 of Ecgferth of Mercia, Offa’s chosen heir, and Æthelræd of Northumbria.⁷³ His prediction of misery was not far off the mark: Mercia now entered a period of steep decline, and Northumbria continued to be roiled by dynastic disputes and conflicts with neighbours.

Mercia and Northumbria would continue as independent kingdoms for seventy years or more after 796, but many critics have seen in the closing lines of *Beowulf* a prediction of the end of the Geats: some indeed speak of their ‘annihilation’ or ‘doom’, terms evocative of Judgment Day or Ragnarök.⁷⁴ There have been sceptics: for example, Kenneth Sisam, Robert T. Farrell and Roberta Frank have argued that there is evidence for the

⁷³ Cited by Leyerle, ‘Beowulf the Hero and King’, p. 98, after Whitelock, *The Audience of Beowulf*, pp. 88–9; the letter (dated after 10 Aug. 796) is printed Dümmler, *Epistolae karolini aevi tomus ii*, p. 171.

⁷⁴ For example, Klaeber, *Beowulf*, p. xl; Wrenn, *Beowulf with the Finnesburg Fragment*, p. 49, retained in Wrenn and Bolton, *Beowulf with the Finnesburg Fragment*, p. 39; Berger and Leicester, ‘Social Structure as Doom’, p. 63; Earl, *Thinking About Beowulf*, pp. 29, 77, 178; Mitchell and Robinson, *Beowulf*, note to ll. 3010b–21a. Probably the most compelling argument in favour of the doom of the Geats is by Robinson, ‘History, Religion, Culture’, note to ll. 3010b–21a.

existence of a Geatish nation in the tenth century or even later, and John D. Niles has dismissed the idea of the annihilation of the Geats as a 'historicist fallacy'.⁷⁵ The recent revision of Klaeber's *Beowulf* sums up in a note to lines 3018–19 the evidence for the continued existence of an independent Geatish nation after the period in which *Beowulf* is set, but the introduction states that 'it seems as if the annihilation of their kingdom is virtually foreshadowed in the messenger's speech announcing the death of Bēowulf' (p. lx).

At first blush it looks as if Fulk, Bjork and Niles are trying to have it both ways, but as Fred C. Robinson has pointed out, there are two questions here, and they need to be considered separately. One is how long the historical *Gautar* (if the *Gautar* of Scandinavian sources and the *Gēatas* of *Beowulf* are the same nation) continued to enjoy an independent existence. The other is how the Anglo-Saxon audience of *Beowulf* is likely to have understood what the poem says on the subject. The answers to the two questions may not be the same.⁷⁶

I will leave the question of the historical Geats to others and concentrate on how to understand the text. The poem makes no plain statement about the fate of the Geats. We also do not know if the Anglo-Saxons thought of that nation as extinct, or if they knew much about it at all: Dorothy Whitelock long ago observed that the poem seemed to assume more knowledge of the Danes than of the Geats.⁷⁷ That *Beowulf* predicts the annihilation of the Geats is an inference resting on three passages. The first is part of Wiglaf's speech scolding the cowardly retainers who ran to the woods rather than face the dragon:

Nū sceal sincþego ond swyrdgifu,
eall ēðelwyn ēowrum cynne
lufen ālicgean; londrihtes mōt

⁷⁵ Sisam, *The Structure of Beowulf*, pp. 54–8; Farrell, 'Beowulf, Swedes and Geats', pp. 257–69; Frank, 'Skaldic Verse and the Date of *Beowulf*', p. 157; Niles, 'Myth and History', pp. 227–8.

⁷⁶ Robinson, 'History, Religion, Culture', p. 40. Not all are willing to assume the identity of the *Gēatas* and the *Gautar*: see, for example, Niles, *Old English Heroic Poems*, pp. 39–49.

⁷⁷ *The Audience of Beowulf*, p. 55.

þære mægburge monna æghwylc
 idel hweorfan syððan æðelingas
 feorran gefricgean flēam ēowerne
 dōmlēasan dād. (2884–90)

Now the getting of treasure and giving of swords,
 all the joy of your home, all comfort
 must cease for your kin; every man
 of the family must go
 without land-right, after nobles
 learn from afar of your flight,
 that inglorious deed.

The revised Klaeber sees these lines as establishing ‘the logical relationship between the thegns’ failure and the nation’s future misery’.⁷⁸ Yet the editors do not explain, and it is not obvious, how the immediate subject matter—the coming dispossession of the disgraced thegns—is logically related to the supposed national calamity.⁷⁹ Perhaps the adverb *feorran* ‘from afar’ could be taken to suggest that the *æðelingas* ‘nobles’ may be Swedish and Frankish, not Geatish. But why the Swedes and Franks should be concerned to dispossess the cowardly thegns as part of their larger project of annihilating the Geats is far from clear. Our reading of the passage is less strained if we take the *æðelingas* who are *feorran* simply as Geats who are not present at the moment and so have not yet heard of the thegns’ disgrace.

The other two passages are alike and can be considered together. The first comes near the end of the messenger’s speech, after he has told why he expects a renewal of hostilities with the Swedes and Franks. He is explaining that the dragon’s treasure will be burned on the pyre with Beowulf:

þā sceall brond fretan,
 æled þeccan, nalles eorl wegan

⁷⁸ Klaeber’s *Beowulf*, note to l. 2884.

⁷⁹ The Mitchell–Robinson edition makes the passage into one that is entirely about the fate of the nation by translating both *cynn* and *mægburg* as ‘nation’. But *cynne* is here limited by *ēowrum* ‘your’, referring to the cowardly retainers, so that the least awkward translation of *ēowrum cynne* is ‘your family’. And *mægburg* more often means ‘family’ than ‘nation’.

māððum tō gemyndum, ne mægð scýne
 habban on healse hringweorðunge,
 ac sceal geōmormōd, golde berēafod,
 oft nalles æne elland tredan,
 nū se herewīsa hleahtor ālegde
 gamen ond glēodrēam. (3014–21)

Flame shall devour them,
 fire enfold them; the warrior shall not carry
 the treasure as a memorial, nor shall the lovely maiden
 wear the ring-adornments on her neck,
 but, sad in mind, deprived of gold,
 must often, not once, tread a foreign land
 now that the leader of the army has laid aside laughter,
 game and music.

The second passage is in the poet's voice, during Beowulf's funeral. The text, unfortunately, is badly damaged; bracketed letters are doubtful:

Higum unrōte
 mōdceare mǣndon mondryhtnes cw[e]alm;
 swylce giōmorgyd [Gē]at[isc] mēowle
 [* * * b]undenheorde
 [song] sorgcearig s[wīð]e geneahhe
 þæt hīo hyre [heofun]g[da]gas hearde ond[r]ēde,
 wælfylla wo[r]n, [w]erudes egesan,
 hȳ[n]ðo [ond] hæf[t]nȳd. (3148–55)

Unhappy in mind, they
 complained of their soul-sorrow, the fall of their lord;
 likewise a Geatish woman again and again
 * * * with hair bound up,
 sorrowful and full of care, sang a lament,
 that she dreaded hard days of weeping,
 numerous battle-deaths, terror of an army,
 humiliation and captivity.

The women will be carried off into foreign lands, says the messenger, and the poet later adds *hē ne lēag fela / wyrda ne worda* 'he did not lie much with

respect to events or words' (3029–30). Though the text at lines 3148–55 is badly damaged, editors generally agree on the words *mēowle*—there is a woman present—and *hæftnȳd*—she is afraid of captivity.

The thinking of those who read the doom of the Geats in these lines is presumably that women could only be carried off from a defeated people. Kenneth Sisam makes two valuable points here.⁸⁰ One is that the abduction of women seems to be a formula in battle-poetry: it is found in *Genesis A*: *Sceolde forht monig / blāchlēor ides bifiende gān / on fremdes fæðm* 'many a fearful pale-cheeked lady would have to go into the enemy's embrace' (1969–71). To be sure, this is the result of a defeat: the enemies of the cities of the plain have gained the upper hand, carrying off everything there, including Abram's brother Lot. But Abram comes to the rescue and brings back *omnem substantiam et Loth fratrem suum cum substantia illius mulieres quoque et populum* 'all the substance, and Lot his brother, with his substance, the women also and the people' (Genesis 14:16). The cities, including Sodom and Gomorrah, have not been annihilated—yet!

Which brings us to the second of Sisam's points: the abduction of women is the consequence of a setback that may well be temporary—one of the horrible but predictable vicissitudes of the kind of large-scale warfare that the Geats now face. It is easy to find instances in historical sources of women being carried off from groups that are not on the edge of doom. While the viking Hæsten was out raiding in 894, King Alfred's army attacked his stronghold at Benfleet and *genāmon eal þæt þær binnan wæs, ge on fēo ge on wīfum, ge ēac on bearnum, ond brōhton eall into Lundenbyrig* 'took all that was within, both money and women, and also children, and brought all into London' (ASC A). Alfred restored Hæsten's wife and two sons to him because one son was his own godchild and the other that of one of his ealdormen, but the *Chronicle* does not report what the English did with the other women and children. In 1011 the Danes captured Canterbury, and *hī þær genāman inne ealle þā gebādode menn and weras and wīf* 'and they took all the men in orders and all the men and women who were within' (ASC E). Later they martyred Archbishop Ælfheah, whom they had seized, but the *Chronicle* does not report what became of the others.

⁸⁰ *The Structure of Beowulf*, pp. 55–7.

Soon England would fall to the Danes, but even so the Anglo-Saxons were not annihilated.

Abduction of women is mentioned frequently in other chronicles. For example, the *Annals of Fulda* report that in 873 the viking Hruodolf (Hrōðulf in Old English; Hrólfr in Icelandic) landed in Frisia demanding tribute, and when the inhabitants refused to pay, threatened that *cunctis maribus occisis mulieres et paruulos cum omni substantia illorum in captiuitatem esse ducturum* 'after all the males had been killed the women and children with all their moveable wealth should be taken off into captivity'.⁸¹ In the battle that followed Hruodolf was killed and the inhabitants saved. But the outcome was not always so happy: the same annals report that in 894 the Avars crossed the Danube and committed atrocities on Frankish territory: *Nam homines et uetulas matronas penitus occidendo, iuuenculas tantum ut iumenta pro libidine exercenda secum trabentes totam Pannoniam usque ad internationem deleuerunt* 'They killed men and old women outright, and carried off the young women alone with them like cattle to satisfy their lusts, and reduced the whole of Pannonia to a desert'.⁸² The author of the Irish *Cogad Gáedel re Gallaib* (*War of the Irish with the Foreigners*) records with many a rhetorical flourish that the vikings, invading Munster in the early tenth century, plundered churches, killed the chiefs and their best warriors, reduced the land to waste, and carried off women and others:

Many were the blooming, lively women; and the modest, mild, comely maidens; and the pleasant, noble, stately, blue-eyed young women; and the gentle, well brought up youths, and the intelligent, valiant champions, whom they carried off into oppression and bondage over the broad green sea.⁸³

⁸¹ Kurze, *Annales Fuldensis*, p. 80; Reuter, *Annals of Fulda*, p. 72.

⁸² Kurze, p. 125; Reuter, p. 129.

⁸³ Todd, *War of the Gaedhil with the Gaill*, p. 43. See also the *Annals of Clonmacnoise* (ed. Murphy, p. 134), describing the cruelties of Danish rule in Ireland: 'As many women as they could Lay hands upon, noble or ignoble, young or ould, married or unmarried, whatsoever birth or adge they were of, were by them abused most beastly, and filthily, and such of them as they liked best, were by them sent over seas into their one countrys there to be kept by them to use their unlawfull lusts.'

Decades later, when the hero-king Brian Boru was campaigning victoriously against his Norse and Irish enemies, he avenged these atrocities with some of his own:

Many women also, and boys, and girls, were brought to bondage and ruin by them [i.e. by Brian and his people]; and the foreigners had deserved that treatment, because by them the provocation had been given, and they had been the aggressors to contest with them their own country and their lawful inheritance. (pp. 115–17)

For the poets of *Beowulf* and *Genesis A*, and for chroniclers like those I have quoted, the abduction of women is a metonymy for the horror of war. Heroic poetry, including the Eddic *Völsung* cycle, the *Nibelungenlied*, *La Chanson de Roland* and most of *Beowulf*, focuses narrowly on the combatants and a few other characters, and rarely does the field of vision widen to remind us that war brings extreme misery to whole populations: indiscriminate maiming and killing, capture and sale into slavery, destruction of crops with consequent famine, mass displacement of populations.⁸⁴ Warfare in the Middle Ages seems, in fact, to have inflicted no less misery than it does now.

The *Beowulf* poet is not a pacifist: he rejoices in the destruction of monstrous and human enemies just as his characters do. But he is too great a poet to permit his audience entirely to lose sight of the costs of the heroic values that he celebrates. In his world, men rise in the cold morning to risk their lives contending for treasure and honour while women are carried off by force to be raped or sold as slaves, and the raven, the eagle

⁸⁴ Maiming and killing: see the *Annals of Fulda* 884: *Servi et ancillae cum paruulis suis consumpti sunt, primoribus quibusdam tentis, quibusdam occisis et, quod turpior erat, truncatis manu, lingua, genitalibus remissis* 'Male and female slaves with their children were killed, many of the leading men were captured, killed, or—what is more disgraceful—had their hand or tongue or genitals cut off and were sent back' (Kurze, p. 113; Reuter, p. 110). Capture and sale into slavery: see Pelteret, *Slavery in Early Medieval England from the Reign of Alfred until the Twelfth Century*, pp. 70–4. Destruction of crops and displacement of population: the classic example for England is William the Conqueror's harrying of the North: see e.g. Kapelle, *Norman Conquest of the North*, p. 277: 'it was nothing less than an attempt to create an artificial famine on a regional scale'.

and the wolf feast on the corpses of the dishonoured dead. No wonder that modern readers, shocked by his powerful and harrowing description of the coming war,⁸⁵ have often concluded that the Geats are doomed.

⁸⁵ I have offered a brief analysis of part of the messenger's speech, with particular emphasis on its effectiveness in inspiring terror, in *Introduction to Old English*, pp. 144–5.

Afterword

PROJECTS CHANGE under our hands. An early outline reminds me that what I had in mind when I began work on this book was a semiotics of conflict in *Beowulf*, starting from the conceit that the practice of violence is structured like a language, an exchange of blows or a feud like a dialogue. That book still seems worth writing, but I am almost certainly not the one to do it.

What the project has become, instead, is a study of a social and economic system, here called the Economy of Honour, organized around the possession of treasure as a sign of one's prowess in battle and the overlapping and conventional roles of various participants in this system. That the heroic warrior of early medieval narrative operates in such a system is far from a new idea; further, the concepts of honour and gift-exchange that are the foundation of this book have informed studies, many of them cited here, in a wide variety of disciplines. This book's contribution is to define the Beowulfian Economy of Honour, perhaps more precisely than has been done before, and, applying that definition, to test several critical positions and reread a number of scenes and characters. Another aim has been to claim a place of importance for *Beowulf* in the ongoing scholarly discussion of violence in the literature of the Middle Ages.

All of the conclusions offered in the various chapters might arguably be deduced from a single statement in the Introduction: 'Violence is a social practice, and every violent act is a social transaction' (p. 7). What I did not suspect when I began to write was how often the eye would be drawn away from the violent act itself, the social interaction between combatants, and towards the groups to which the disputants belong, the joyful and socially cohesive sites where violent acts are instigated, planned and, finally, rewarded. Here is where we find the most powerful drivers

of Beowulfian violence, for this is where all the benefits—honour and its material manifestations—that come from good performance on the battlefield are bestowed, and this is also where the punishments for sloth and cowardice are delivered: dishonour, ridicule, even dispossession.

We naturally pay most attention to the warrior who commits violent acts with his own hands: he is the one to whom the system delivers the greatest rewards. But there are other important roles to fill: those of the authority who makes sure the rules of the dispute are followed, the peacemaker or negotiator who works to bring the dispute to a close, the inciter who works to keep it going, the referee who declares and rewards the winner, the religious adviser who prescribes a penance after the fact. These figures (not all of them required in every dispute) are best understood as participating in, rather than standing apart from, the individual dispute and the wider culture of violence. Even the peacemaker, who may be a king (e.g. Hrothgar in *Beowulf* 461–72), a cleric (e.g. Archbishop Theodore in *HE* iv. 21) or, at least once in a kindred culture, a queen (Theudelinda in Paul the Deacon's *Historia Langobardorum*¹), plays a conventional role in the ritual of the dispute. One who, like Hrothgar or the Icelander Snorri the Priest, makes peace at one time may well at some other time be responsible for terrible bloodshed. Indeed, no class of person is restricted to just one role: that of peacemaker seems especially appropriate for the cleric, but the cleric can also fight, both in literature (think of the fierce Archbishop Turpin of *La Chanson de Roland*) and in fact (a bishop and an abbot were among those slain at the battle of Ashingdon in 1016—*ASC* E). It is hard to find anyone who plays the peacemaker, or any other role, standing outside the system and criticizing its fundamentals.

This is not to say that all is happiness in the heroic world. To live in a warlike culture is to live with the constant risk of the violent loss of friends and family and one's own life. Heroic poets and storytellers of all the cultures of northern Europe are well aware of this—one thinks of *Y Goddodin*, *Hrólfs saga Kraka* and *Das Hildebrandslied* as making especially eloquent statements concerning the sadness of heroic life, and in *La Chanson de Roland* Charlemagne finally cries, *si penuse est ma vie* 'how toilsome is my life'

¹ Waitz, *Scriptores rerum langobardicarum*, iv. 8–9, pp. 118–19.

(4000) as he once again faces the necessity of going to war before he has had time to mourn the loss of Roland and so many others. For that matter the same kind of sadness pervades the *Aeneid*, the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey* and the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. It may be, as Stanley B. Greenfield long ago suggested, that we can identify a specifically epic mode of tragedy characterized by ‘a sense of futility in the splendid achievement, a resignation and despair in the face of the limits of life’.² But my own sense is that the sadness of the epic is not all that different from the sadness of life itself, the awareness, however hard we try to forget it, that the mortality rate of human beings on this earth has always been, and always will be, one hundred percent. The *Beowulf* poet is especially aware of the inevitability of death and good at reminding us how devastating the loss of friends and family can be; but is equally good at depicting, even sharing in, the delight a warrior takes in the death of an enemy. Often, as in the poem’s last scenes, these powerful, conflicting emotions stand in precarious balance. Much of *Beowulf*’s emotional power, the spell it has cast over so many generations of readers, is due to the immense energy latent in its tense equilibrium of just such opposites: rise and fall, victory and defeat, honour and disgrace, life and death.

² Greenfield, ‘*Beowulf* and Epic Tragedy’, p. 104.

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This book examines violence in its social setting, and especially as an essential element in the heroic system of exchange (sometimes called the Economy of Honour). It situates *Beowulf* in a northern European culture where violence was not stigmatized as evidence of a breakdown in social order but rather was seen as a reasonable way to get things done; where kings and their retainers saw themselves above all as warriors whose chief occupation was the pursuit of honour; and where the most successful kings were those perceived as the most predatory. Though kings and their subjects yearned for peace, the political and religious institutions of the time did little to restrain their violent impulses.

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PETER S. BAKER is Professor of English at the University of Virginia.

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